Abstract - Louise Swoyer

Interviewee: Louise Swoyer
Interviewer: Tristan Luccari, Julie Becker, Jasmine Sprauve
Date: October 12, 2017
Location: Old Main, SUNY Cortland, Cortland, New York
Length: 1 audio file, 00:41:46

Louise Swoyer grew up in Cortland along with her parents and two brothers. She has traveled across the United States, visiting and living in different places. While growing up in Cortland, her father would take the family on road trips, through upstate New York and even up into New England. She remembers the great time she had in school with her teachers and friends, and at home with her family. She specifically remembered her grandfather, tending his garden. Her Grandfather John, J.W. Evans, used to work at the Wickwire Factory in Cortland, N.Y, but doesn’t recall him working while she was young. Louise attended Cayuga College, in New York, and after that traveled a bit, before finally settling down in Columbus, Ohio, where her husband had taught at Ohio State University. She eventually would go onto teach at the University as well, after introducing the ‘Adopt a School program’ in the city. The impact that Louise has not only had on the people she came in contact with, but even children that benefitted from the actions that she had taken to encourage a better education, is remarkable. Louise currently lives in Phoenix, A.Z, but has recently returned to visit Cortland a few years ago. She explained how it looked awfully different, other than Main Street, which continues to look very similar.
FIELD NOTES—Louise Swoyer

Interviewee: Mrs. Louise Swoyer
Interviewers: Jasmine Sprauve, Julie Becker, and Tristan Luccari
Date: October 12, 2017
Location: Phone interview from the Public History Lab, SUNY Cortland, Cortland, NY
Length: 41:45

The Interviewee: Louise Swoyer is a retiree currently living in Phoenix, Arizona. She was born in 1939 in Cortland and has since moved all over the country due to her now ex-husband’s military service. Most of her working years were spent in schools, helping the schools gain funding for different projects and initiatives. She has two children, Rebecca and David, both of whom are now married with children of their own. Her grandfather, J.W. Evans, was a fine wire drawer for the Wickwire Steelworks plant in Cortland, NY. She discusses her memory of her grandfather, his work, and the Cortland area.

The Interviewers: Jasmine Sprauve, Julie Becker, and Tristan Luccari are students in the Intro to Public History course at SUNY Cortland, fall 2017. Julie and Tristan are both History and Social Studies Teaching majors. Jasmine is a History major with a minor in Asian/Middle Eastern Studies.

Description of the Interview: The interview took place via phone call from the Public History Lab with Mrs. Swoyer from her home in Phoenix. Our interview was delayed due to an issue with the telephone where she could not hear us when the phone was on speaker. We decided to conduct the interview anyway, but technical limitations meant we were unable to record 100% of our discussions. We spoke for just over 40 minutes with no further interruptions.

Note on Recording: Recorded on an iPhone 6.
Transcript - Louise Swoyer

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Jasmine: So tell me a little bit about yourself.

Louise Swoyer: I currently and have lived in in Phoenix, Arizona now for seven years I moved here in 2010 from Columbus, Ohio where I lived for 41 years. I was born in Cortland Memorial Hospital on September 1st, 1939. Which as my, one of my older brother who by the way were 11 and 14 years older, how they always reminded me was the day that Germany invaded Poland, and we also think of that as the beginning of the Second World War at least as far as the United States was concerned, they began to pay attention. Let’s see, went to the Public Schools in Cortland, Randall Elementary School and Cortland High School. I graduated in 1957, and my class mates had a 60 year reunion just recently. I attended Cayuga College on Cayuga Lake, graduated from there in 1961, which a bachelor’s degree major in history, political science. I also had a teaching certificate issued to me. I did not, however, teach in New York, because I also married in 1961, moved with my husband to Louisiana to Barksdale Air Force Base, where he was stationed. When we left there we moved to Atlanta, Georgia where he was a graduate student in history, and I worked for Delta Airlines at that time. Our daughter was born in 1965. We moved when he was granted his master’s and working on his PhD we moved to Milwaukee,
Wisconsin, where he was employed at the University of Wisconsin Milwaukee. After only a year, which was too short a time for me because I liked Milwaukee a lot, we moved to Columbus, where he was employed by Ohio State University, in the history department. My son was born in Columbus, and during the years when my children were young, I was busy volunteering, taking care of the family of course, but busy volunteering with the public schools that they attended and also with the League of Women Voters. And that volunteer position I was very interested in public education what was going and studying those issues along with the other women. Let’s see, after that, my children were at school, and I was employed by a nonprofit organization which was charged with peacefully desegregating the public schools of Columbus. Very interesting position because I worked with all kinds of very influential community leaders religious leaders business leaders, representatives from the institutions of higher education. After that concluded very peacefully by the way, I was hired by the Columbus Public Schools, my job title was a volunteer coordinator which meant that I would work with the volunteers in schools. But early on the superintendent of the schools asked me to start an Adopt A School program, and that was again one of the most interesting experiences because once again it was my job to assemble a committee, an advisory committee of people. Let’s see we had a president of one of the banks, we had business leaders, presidents of their own companies, we had religious leaders, the Bishop of the Catholic church was a member, we had a representative from the Jewish community, lots of community, very proud of the community leaders, who were involved in that effort, at the time of desegregation there were 120 public schools, elementary, middle and high school and 110,000 students, so it was a major challenge as you might imagine to think about getting a doctors for a whole school, we started out small, I think we focused on 7 of what she considered schools that could use some outside help, were weren't looking for
money, we were looking for people to come into the school as tutors as assistants as advisors, whatever, and got off to a really good start, let’s see, we were able to expand, and I don't know, I did leave the school district after, I don't know, about 12 years or so, and at that point nearly all of the schools, had been adopted, however, when the schools were desegregated there was a, you've probably read or heard about it, white flight to the suburban schools, so the population declined and a number of schools were closed. There were special plans put in place however for students to apply for different schools, and, the, there were a number of alternative schools that children could attend, as a matter of fact, and this was handled through a lottery, both of my children were fortunate enough to go to the schools in the lottery that we were able to select because they had different programs these were integrated schools, let’s see following my work with the schools, I was invited to take a position at Ohio State University in the college of business at the school of public policy and management, it was an interesting position, because what we did was to supply programs, sessions, seminars, for businesses, well not so much businesses, but rather public entities, county, city ,state, departments. And after they had determined the need of their employees, we would devise and offer special programs for them, such topics as time management, organizational skills, using resources from the outside community, that sort of thing. This was of course an extension of the kinds of work that had done with the public schools and then with the nonprofit organizations. Following that I was invited to be an office manager for the branch of the YWCA which took me out into one of the suburbs, and I enjoyed that very much. My husband, and this is my second marriage, my husband who was a professor at Ohio State and I divorced after about 20 years of marriage, and I remarried about 10 years later. My husband, second husband was older, and retired, so I retired as well. We were able to travel a great deal. As a matter of fact I visited 50 states during those
travels, and when I was younger as well. And of all my other work experience was working for the Census Bureau, the U.S Census Bureau, I did that in 1999-2000 and then again 10 years later 2009-2010. I am not working now, I am very much retired and very active and exercising and doing fun things here in Arizona and like it very, very much.

Jasmine: Alright Mrs. Swoyer, just hearing about all of this I can tell you've lived a very rich life.

-On phone..

Jasmine: Ten!

-On phone..

Jasmine: Ah that.

-On phone..

Jasmine: Okay, now. Going back to your childhood, because you were born here in Cortland right?

-On phone..

Jasmine: Alright, so tell us a little bit about you know going up with your family and your brothers and all that.

Mrs. Swoyer: Well I've been thinking about that, not only because my conversation with Professor Faulkenbury, but because I've been going through many records. My older brother was the, I guess you'd say the repository for both sides of the family, both my mothers and fathers, and he continued to live in Cortland until he died. And all that (laughter) has come to me, lots of very interesting things, which I've been going through lately. I remember a very happy childhood actually. When I was born and for the first few years til I was about 5 years
old, we lived with my grandfather, Vanweigen, that would be father's, paternal grandfather. We lived, gee I think it would be an extension of Port Watson Street, and if you're familiar with that part of town the Tiopa Nioka River is I believe to the east, the east of the downtown area, and there's a bridge, we lived just over the bridge on what was called Ponable Avenue, which would be just down the hill from Route 81. You can actually see the house where I grew up. When I was five my parents decided that we needed to be in town and live in the house that dad had built for my mother on Cedar Street which is right off Port Watson Street, and I could go to Randall School, which I did. I have, oh, great memories of the lovely teachers Ms. Bristol and Ms. Henry who were first and second grade teachers, that kind of thing. My brothers of course, were older and going into their teenage years at that point. We lived actually, Randall School is located not too many blocks away from the Wickwire factory where my grandfather had worked and not too far from the downtown area, which was handy because in those years, we walked a lot. My father, of course, had transportation he had a truck and he operated a business, a plumbing, and heating business. My brothers were getting to an age where they could drive, yea, they were both driving, and you know, we circulated around the town. I had some family in town, my grandfather and grandmother lived on Broadway, which is just down the hill from the University, actually, and on the way to the athletic fields now, and an Aunt and Uncle and Cousin were in town as well, so I had some family, but just a very nice growing up. And as I said we were able to walk downtown having just looked at this Burgess Remembers book, I remember Mr. Burgess, and being in his store, it was very popular, Burgess Clothing, and all of the shops in that area. We knew those people, and were friendly with them because they were the merchants we used whenever we needed anything. I also remember what a pretty, pretty, landscape, it is around Cortland. My father, because he was engaged in business, and at that time of course our
telephone was located in our home, and people would call him and ask him to come and do jobs for them and so on. And to escape we would go for rides in the car on the weekends, so we did a lot of riding around the countryside. I know all of the town in Cortland County, Truxton, Cuyler, Freeville, you know, on and on and we ventured further afield than that because as I said my father liked to get away. So we traveled up to the Adirondack Mountains, and I have nice memories of very primitive cottages up in those areas. Raquette Lake was a favorite. And going into New England as well, up into Massachusetts, particularly I think. A great growing up. I liked school, liked school, always, and had a very nice experience in my middle and high school years, and even though I seriously considered going to Cortland State as it was called then. Or my aunt by the way, my father had one sibling, an aunt and she graduated from the Cortland Teachers College, back in gee wiz … 1911 or must have been a little bit later than that later in the 1910’s. And Cortland was a choice as was Cayuga College, but having had all of that experience touring around, I was interested in Cayuga College because it was located on the lake, and it was a little bit more rural setting, which appealed to me at that time, I think that about fills it up unless you have a question about that.

Jasmine: No actually you did a wonderful job explaining everything i was going to bring up actually.

Jasmine: Alright what I'm going to do now is switch you over to Julie and then she's going to get into the questions about your grandfather and working in the factory alright?
Julie: Hello, this is Julie again. So I was just, we were all wondering about your
grandfather and the memory of have of him.

Mrs. Swoyer: Okay my grandpa John, or J.W as he was called, is a very fond memory, he
was a lovely man. I was thinking about him today as I was driving back from my exercise class,
and he was a little guy, I'm about 5'5, 5'4, 5'5, and I think he was about my height, maybe a little
shorter, and a very wiry fellow. He was born in, let’s see, November 10th, 1868 in Elias, Ohio.
His early years were not so happy, his mother died at his birth, and he was raised by his maternal
grandmother and his uncle. Some years later, his father remarried, but, grandpa John, and his
middle name was Waters, W-A-T-E-R-S, and the last name evens, E-V-A-N-S, he stayed with
his grandmother, although I believe he did have contact with his second family. There were
several boys and a daughter born in the second marriage, but he was with his grandmother, until
she died, which was, I think he was around 16 or 17 years old at that point and then was pretty
much on his own. His mother had immigrated from Wales, and his father from southern
England. The story that I remember was that they were both from Wales, so it was kind of a
revelation when I was going through my, these records, family records recently, that I realized
that actually his father was English, because the tale in the family was that they were both
singers, and maybe they were, because there was apparently a lot of musical talent in the family.
But my grandpa Evans sang, liked to sing, and I, he was much older of course when I came
along, but he must have been a tenor, I believe. And the tale is that they did much singing when
he was young, even some memories that he had of having sung one time for Henry Ford, with
the Ford Motor Company, and even John D Rockefeller. He must have been invited to some
kind of a gala, or festive occasion, and he was able to sing there. He took that talent with him for the rest of his life. He was actually recruited, and I'm guessing from the historical information that I have about Wickwires that it must have been about 1893 or 94 perhaps when he was recruited from Cleveland, Ohio to be a fine wire drawer at the Wickwire plant, and let me think about this for a minute, must have been those years. Now how in the world he ever picked up that skill and they recruited him I don't know but they must have been looking for a lot people, because at that point the factory was getting underway and certainly expanded a great deal, so they were really looking for employees. He must have been very valued because I know that he was sent to Canada at one point, to Hamilton, Canada, to train others in the same skill. And it was always talked about in the family, as you know this was really something. He made a really good living doing this and was a very valued employee. He met my grandmother in Cortland and they were married in December of 1896. She was born in 1880, in April of 1880, she was only 16 yrs old. He was what, about 12 years older than she, two years later, my mother was born in 1898, her name was Violet, Violet Evans, my grandmother by the way her name was Bertha Bell Stark, then became Evans of course upon her marriage. They had five children after my mom, in 1898. My Uncle Fay was born two years later, then my Uncle Leroy, or Roy as we called him. They decided to wait a few more years and 16 years later two girls were born my Aunt Betty, and my Aunt Virginia or Ginny. They must have had a great life, I believe that probably the home that they built on Broadway, 19 Broadway, is still there. I had driven by in recent years, it's very different then it was, it’s not as lovely as it was because they removed the beautiful front porch, but it is still there and apparently from the records that I have, it was built by my grandmother’s father, Richard Stark, who was a builder of houses, and even hotels. He apparently built a hotel in Cortland at one point, probably along with the help of his family, my
grandmother being the second of his children. And I had no idea which house, although as a child, I remember when we would drive down to grandma and grandpas house my mother would say ok that’s a house that was built by my Grandfather Stark, and there’s one over there. These would be house on Thompson Street and Port Watson Street, which are our main streets in the city. And let’s see, they raised their family, apparently, grandpa really enjoyed his experience, there was a slight issue with the reassignment to work in Canada, because my grandmother was not happy to be removed from her family in the Cortland-Freeville area, and she returned to Cortland at one point leaving the children, the three small children with my grandfather. Apparently there was a Diphtheria epidemic during that period and my other was hospitalized, she had memories of that, talked to me about it. You know, it was a difficult time, and they insisted that she take her medicine, and she remembered her mother, coming back to visit, and a ladder was placed outside the room she was in, so her mother could climb the ladder and look in the window to see her. At some point, after my mother did recover, they returned to Cortland and grandpa was back at his job at Wickwires. Apparently he must have worked perhaps close to 50 years there. When was young I certainly not remember him working at that point, but I believe that Wickwire was a very good employer, and my impression is that they really took care of their employees. I'm guessing that he may have worked as long as into the early years of World War II, perhaps about the time that the United States was getting involved, I'm not sure about what day he might have retired, but I have a feeling that he did work there for a good number of years, and I always thought, you know very kindly about Wickwires. As a matter of fact, when he died, it just occurred to me, he died in 1962, he was 94 years old. During his later years after my grandmother had died in 1947, he sold the house on Broadway, and he spent his time moving from one family to another. He would spend certain amount of, in his
determination a certain amount of months with one child, such as my Aunt Ginny, in the Vestal area, and her family, and then when he decided he wanted to move on he might move to Cincinnati, where my Aunt Betty lived with her family and be there for a half a year, whatever, and then maybe move back to Cortland to be with my mother for a period. And then he would fly to Phoenix, Arizona where my Uncle Roy had located in the late 1940s. So he had a really nice retirement moving from place to place, as he wished, and apparently, he was really beloved by all of the family members because everybody was glad to have him come. I didn’t want him to leave necessarily, but I had a good time with him. Now he did die in 1962 as I mentioned. But our family is buried in the Cortland Rural Cemetery, now that’s something to think about too. “Rural”, and the cemetery is right there near the university, and it certainly isn’t rural today, but at one point it was, and there are lots of monuments in the cemetery that date back many, many years. I have great grandparents buried there, as well as great uncles and aunts and so on and so forth, but the Evans monument is actually located on the western side of the cemetery, right across the road from a big Wickwire monument. Now I, I don't know if he purchased that, that plot specifically because of its location, but I always thought it was kind of neat because of where he had worked and his connection with Wickwires, that their burial plot was in that location. Fond memories about grandpa, Grandpa John, and what a nice guy he was. He also did follow his singing career when he moved to Cortland, as a matter of fact, I heard him, you know he would reminisce we would sit with him of course when he was visiting, living with us, and he would talk about having sung at various other churches and various family gatherings and other special events around Cortland, and he was actually music director, choir director I suppose at the Memorial Baptist Church, which is a church located on Tompkins, not too far away from the main entrance to the Cortland Cemetery. There is still a church in operation there. I don't
believe it is a Baptist church at this point, but he was choir director there for, about 45 years I suppose, and during that time he was also singing in other places. So in fact, (laughs), his mother and father were singers, and brought that talent with them, he inherited, a very interesting thing, we did have some grandchildren who are singers in the family and there’s quite a bit of musical talent. So he passed on some really nice genes I think.

Julie: Well that sounds very interesting, fascinating history (laughs). I was wondering too, is there any other family members that have worked in the factory?

Mrs. Swoyer: No, no, that’s a good question, and I'm not sure why neither of his sons did so, they seemed to take different tracks. One, Fay, I know was a salesman, and I don't remember where. He died kind of young, as a matter of fact he died in 1948. My grandmother died in November of 1947, and Fay died in 1948. He had been in World War I, served in World War I, and he actually died in the veteran’s hospital, in Bath, New York, so I'm not sure exactly what the ailment was there. My Uncle Roy, I don't know exactly what his employment was, but for some reason no, they did not follow their father. They would've had a good reference too, you would've thought they'd take advantage of it, but they did not apparently.

Julie: Well that’s very interesting as well, and interesting, I'm going to pass the phone over to Tristan to ask you some more questions. Alright. You too.

Tristan: Louise? Okay, so, you said your grandfather hadn't really worked in the factory when you were younger now?

Mrs. Swoyer: I don't recall that I was pretty young. See I was born in 1939, and I would've been very small. My early memories revolve more around the house on Broadway, and his gardening in the backyard he had a garden he grew flowers, he grew vegetables, and so on, so
he certainly was not working. That would've been the early 1940s when I was four or five years old, that kind of thing.

Tristan: Did he ever tell you any stories when you were little about working at the factory and what it was like, or anything like that?

Mrs. Swoyer: I don't recall any, and I think it’s because I was so young. Unfortunately as far as grandma and grandpa's grandchildren are concerned, I was in the second group, the younger batch. My brothers were older, as were their cousins, who were the offspring of my two uncles. You know they would've been in the range of 10, 12, 14 years older, and then I was the next one to come along in this younger group. I have younger cousins who are two, four, and as much as 15 years younger than I am, We were in the second group, so we would've missed out on those kinds of things. Grandpa would've talked to us more use about Cortland itself I believe, rather than Wickwires, but obviously, you know, there was a very warm feeling about the Wickwire experience, and the friend that he made there, and being located not too far away from the factory. You know it was not too difficult for him to get there, but actually my family, my mother and father’s home, was located closer to the factory than his and grandma’s, But his experience was Cortland, he liked Cortland, he liked being there, he felt he had many friends and very many happy memories of Cortland.

Tristan: Okay, so when, I guess, do you remember like how the factory, like you know, how the factory had burned down eventually? Do you remember hearing about that and what was your reaction to that guess as you kind of grew around it with your grandfather had worked there and you had the knowledge of what it was?

Mrs. Swoyer: Oh wow, yea Wickwires was huge. Wickwires was a big part of the economy, the city, it was a big factory, there was lots of coming and going, you know as far as
workers were concerned, and other factories were not far away, Brewer-Titchener which was a big factory, which was also located kind of to the east of my home on Cedar Street, and I could hear the factory hammers begin in the morning, you know, with a big noise that’s what would start my day. And they all fed upon each other in various ways, the factories that existed at that point. Well, this smells funny, but the Cortland Corsets Factory was located not too many blocks away from Wickwires. It was significant of course, even for me as a kid because I knew there was a lot going on there. And this is an interesting, a little aside, I learned about the study that you're conducting because one of my friends from high school, not too long ago retired and moved back to Cortland from New York City, where she had lived and worked for many years. And she saw the article in the paper indicating that you had a special study in cooperation with the 1890 House. And our conversations when we were in high school, I apparently had told her about my grandfather and his connection with the Wickwire factory. She lived even closer to the factory than I did, and you know, her recollection of those years was you know there were lots of people, coming and going, lots of men, working in the factory. And it made a real impression on her that, “oh my gosh I know somebody who's relative, grandfather actually worked there.” She kept that memory all these years, and called me, and said, Listen their doing this study, do you think you'd have something you might be able to contribute? And I said, ‘ooo I’m really excited about this you know, this is right up my ally, and then I was in touch with your professor, and that led to the interview that we're doing today.

Tristan: Well yes we're very excited that we're doing this today, it's obviously a really interesting project when it comes to the 1890 House and what was going on here back then.

But…
Mrs. Swoyer: ...and she has been a volunteer at the 1890 House.

Tristan: That’s awesome, I'm going to pass you over to Jasmine if you'd like to hold on please.

Jasmine: Alright, well we've pretty much gone through all of our questions, so is there anything else that you'd like to touch on or comment on before we let you go?

Mrs. Swoyer: Let me see here, I asked you my questions, I was glad about that, I'm happy I was able to make this connection. I'm really indebted to my friend Barbara for passing along the information, and it has been fun, Jasmine, for me to, to be going through some of these records, it’s brought back all kinds of interesting things. I even remember that Cortland has seven valleys, you all may not know that because you're not from Cortland, but we studied Cortland history when I was in say third or fourth grade, and Cortland itself, which was founded in I think 1792, how about that for pulling something up, and of course next to the river because lots of communities needed the river for transportation. And some other facts about the area, it has changed so much over the years, I have to be honest. Main Street looks the same, to me, in many ways, and there was a revitalization a few years ago with some federal funds, I think it helped to spruce up the downtown. But so many things look the same. Tompkins Avenue is still Stately as always there are some beautiful homes there, which are, were Wickwire homes of course as well as Brewers, Titchener’s. One of my classmates in high school, was a Brewer, she was a granddaughter. So lots of very fond memories. This has been really fun for me to do, I've
enjoyed it, you all have, all three have had good questions for me and I hope I've been able to help with your project. It’s been a privilege to do so.

Jasmine: Alright well thank you very much for doing this with us, we greatly appreciate your help, do you have any questions for me or anything like that?

Mrs. Swoyer: ... History paper okay so, there’s some really interesting information in this little booklet, "Burgess Remembers Cortland", which could be flushed out with some other information. You see here I'm going back to my history (laughs). History classes, some interesting papers as an aside that you could generate as a result of the...

Mrs. Swoyer: ... Cortland as was, passing boats, I mean we had some really big businesses operating in such a small city, and then of course, the University, but when I was, let’s see, was in high school? I was still in high school, yes, they were bringing, businessmen in to try to get some other businesses started, and I happened to be going with, dating a boy, who was my classmate, who was the son of the superintendent of schools, and I was invited along to some of those dinners, which was kind of a neat experience for a high school student, just all kinds of nice memories. Thanks for stirring them all up for me, it really been fun.

Jasmine: Alright, glad we could, you could have something come out of this that’s positive as well as us.

Jasmine: Alright, we'll let you enjoy the rest of your afternoon so have a great day.