



# Orleans County Historical Association

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1893 - 1992



# Orleans County Historical Association

## INTERVIEW

Mr. Carl I. Bergerson  
25 North Clinton Street  
Albion, New York

Carl I. Bergerson was born April 10, 1893.

Interviewed by Marjorie C. Radzinski, Albion, N.Y.

B Bergerson

R Radzinski





# Orleans County Historical Association

## ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

The purpose of this project is to collect information about the historical development of Orleans County by means of tape-recorded conversations with people whose experiences reflect the county's growth.

These tapes and transcriptions will be preserved as educational resources and possible publication (all or in part).

I hereby release this tape and transcription to the Orleans County Historical Association.

Carl Bergerson  
Signed

Jan 23, 1980  
Date

Understood and agreed to:

Margaret C. Radzinski  
INTERVIEWER

Jan 23, 1980  
Date

E I was born on April 10, 1893 in Wellsville, New York. My father's name was Orlando Bergerson and he was born in 1855. My mother's maiden name was Emma Johnson and she was born in 1854 in the rural area near Guttenburg, Sweden. My father's occupation was a laborer in an oil refinery at Wellsville, New York. The date of their marriage was 1877 in Sweden.

My wife was Hazel B. Riggs and the date of her birth was June 19, 1896. We were married July 7, 1922. We had one son, Charles Austin Bergerson and he was born June 25, 1923.

I was educated in the Wellsville Public schools and after graduation I attended Syracuse University for one year. I suffered a serious illness which kept me out of college for two years. When I returned to college, I went to Hiram College at Hiram, Ohio where I received a B.S. degree in 1918 although I left college in 1917 to enter the armed forces.

After getting out of the Army on March 10, 1919, I came to Albion to become the teacher of the Science courses in the Albion Schools. I served one year as Science teacher, and the following five years as High School Principal. I also taught science classes during that period.

The history of Albion Schools, I think, is very interesting history.

Back in 1876, the Union Free School District law was passed. At that time Freeman Green was appointed Superintendent of Schools and continued until 1900. At that time, Willis C. Carmer became Superintendent of Schools and continued until 1925. At that time, I was appointed Superintendent of Schools. I continued from 1925 until February 1, 1960. I was succeeded by George Wolfe, who continued for 12 years until 1972. He was succeeded by Malcolm Hewitt who was Superintendent one year and three months when he died of a heart attack. Mr. Hewitt was succeeded by the present Superintendent, Dr. Houk.

The curriculum in the schools when I came (1919) was very limited because it was very largely academic. For instance: in a high school of 300 pupils, we had three Latin teachers. Everybody was expected to take the academic curriculum. We had only one vocational course and that was a course in agriculture.

That was a single exception as far as vocational courses were concerned and that was to be considered as the best in the state as it was the first course in Vocational agriculture that was established in schools.

In the early history of the schools, the School Board Members were elected at the same time the Village Officers were elected. The schools were tied up with the Village Board and had to submit the budget to the Village Board for approval, and they decided how much money could be spent on the school budget. And another detriment was the fact that parents could not vote unless they were property owners. Under the Union Free School District law, parents could be allowed to vote. It certainly was a detriment to the youngsters in the Albion Schools that the parents did not have the right to vote unless they were property owners and taxpayers.

When I became Superintendent, the first change I attempted to make was to get a new heating plant. We asked for a bond issue of about \$25,000.00 for a new heating plant. We lost. We lost it by a resounding majority largely because the parents did not have the right to vote. So I was concerned about the fact that parents had no particular right to vote, and vote for the things that would be best for the pupils who were attending the schools. So I had a conference with members of the State Department of Education. I told them that I thought it was a clear injustice that under the Union Free District Act, that schools all over the state under the Union Free School District Act, parents would be allowed to vote as far as school elections were concerned anytime; Or if they had a child living with them that was of school age. I thought it was an injustice that parents not property owners in Albion could not, and I thought it ought to be changed! It was suggested that I send three members of the (School) Board down to talk to the Legal Division, and so we sent a committee of three people from the Board of Education. They went down to Albany, had a conference with Dr. Gilbert, the council of the Education Department. He said that he would be glad to draw up the Act if we could get somebody from our area to sponsor the Act, and he prepared the legislation. Dr. Lattin, who was our

Representative from this area in the Assembly, agreed to introduce the legislation. It passed the Assembly in 1926, and Commissioner Graves took it to Governor Alfred Smith for his signature. The Governor said, "Graves, this is a good measure for the children in the Albion Schools." Dr. Graves started to give a long explanation but he said, "I don't want to hear anything more, but is it a good measure for the Albion Schools?" And Dr. Graves said, "It certainly is, Governor" and he picked up his pen and signed it right then.

Now, in the following year after this was introduced, I asked for an \$85,000.000 bond issue for the heating plant and other fire escapes on the front of the school, and other improvements. This passed very easily because the parents had an opportunity to vote.

In 1928 we began to introduce other subjects and tried to get a balanced curriculum so that not every child would have to take a college entrance course unless he wanted to do it. We introduced business subjects first, and the next year we expanded and introduced additional subjects. In 1931 we purchased a school site on East Avenue, and submitted a vote for a new High School and a bond issue of \$390,000.00. This, of course, was during the Depression and there was some fear that the measure might not pass. It passed easily because the people needed work at that time in this particular area. And I think that that was one of the factors to get a favorable vote. The building was completed and we entered the new High School in 1933.

At that time, we were able to introduce the shop courses and industrial arts, and Home Economics, and broaden the curriculum somewhat. Albion, during these years had been serving the middle of the county as a High School, and many of the rural schools were open in individual districts. Gradually out of the 38 districts, 24 of them closed and sent their pupils into the Albion schools. The other 14 continued to hold their rural schools open.

The school population during this period became too great for our building space, and of course we needed new buildings to take care of the pupils. The question was: could we afford to build a new building in the Union Free School District, which was made

necessary because of the increase of the rural population that had come into the village schools. It hardly seemed just that the taxpayers of the Union Free School District should pay for a new building made necessary in the increase in school population from the rural districts. The solution seemed to be that we should centralize the schools. So a committee was set up to study the feasibility of the centralization of the schools. This committee was made up of trustees from the rural areas, and some people from the village. The result of the study seemed to indicate that we should centralize, and the committee was in favor of centralization. So that report was sent down to the Commissioner and the report was studied. On May 6, 1953 the report came back that a Central School System should be established. This was laid out by the authorities from Albany. So on June 26, 1953 there was a vote for centralization. 1199 people cast their vote; 736 were for it, 443 people opposed it, 19 votes were void, and one blank vote.

On June 30, 1953 there was a meeting of the Centralization Committee and the members of the Board of Education. On July 20, 1953 was the first meeting of the Board of the Central School District to begin to plan for the operation of the school year. On the following day, July 21, 1953 there was a meeting of the Free School District Board in order to wind up the business of the old district. It was a busy summer. On August 6, 1953 there was a budget meeting with Mr. Arnold of the State Financial Office in which we planned the budget for the Central School for the year. Then on August 10, 1953 we had the first meeting of the Central School Board. On August 17, 1953 we had the first annual meeting of the Central School District and we were under way: the Central School District!!

On December 14, 1954 we had a building vote for a Primary School, and an addition to the High School. This came as a result of centralization and to provide adequate building facilities. The Primary School would take care of a population of practically 700 children. And the addition to the High School with a new cafeteria on the first floor, six additional classrooms, and an additional shop room for machine shop training was rated at the same time.

At the time we were voting on the building proposition, the question came up: should we include a swimming pool? There was considerable doubt that if we did include that that the vote for the High School building would not go through because of the opposition to the swimming pool. So the Board decided to take an informal vote when we voted on the building. They had one ballot box to vote for the building, and one ballot box to ask voters if they wanted the proposition submitted to the District. Much to our surprise, a majority of the people who voted for the building, voted that they did want a proposition for a swimming pool submitted to be included in the building proposition. So, we voted on the swimming pool January 31, 1955 and that was approved. So that was submitted along with the building proposition, and the building began.

In 1955 we sold the bonds for the school building, and on June 28, 1955, the bids were opened. On August 1955 the construction began for the construction of the High School, and for a new Primary School on the same site. But in acquiring the area, for the site required for the Primary School, we already had some 20 acres on the site and we acquired an additional 36 acres I believe, or approximately 36 acres for the price of \$15,000.00, which was a very small price that we paid for it. So that now, of course, we have an adequate site on which our High School building is build - with our Primary School and with our old High School, which is now Middle School. So that we have all of our facilities on one campus, with the exception of the Waterport School, which was part of the District, and where we maintain a separate building.

Over a long period of years in the service of the school, we had an opportunity to witness the development of the pupils who enter in the Primary, who go through 12 years of education in the Albion Schools and on to college. This has always been very interesting and very rewarding.

Many funny incidents have occurred in these 40 years of Administration in the schools. I can remember one occasion when we were in the old Grammar School before the new buildings were built,



that the pupils used to assemble in the morning in the auditorium where attendance was taken. On one morning when I was High School Principal, I came down in the auditorium and pupils were seated. We had a statue of Diana, the Goddess of Chase, down there and I found that somebody had placed whiskers on her during the morning. So I said to the pupils that this was a decoration that I thought we could get along without and I said, "I want the person who did that to come down as soon as assembly is dismissed and tell me about it". And so the pupil who did it came down and told me that he had done it. I said, "You have been honest enough to admit it and now your job is to take the whiskers off".

Then I remember what students used to do in those early days when I was the High School Principal. On the last day of school they were usually permitted to take charge and ask the teachers to give them talks - little anecdotes of any kind that might please them. I remember on one occasion when our Agricultural teacher came up front to speak. He started to recite a poem. He said, "The last leaf is gone". Then he hesitated for a moment and then he repeated, "The last leaf is gone". Then he hesitated a moment and said, "The last leaf is gone, and so is my speech!" (laughter)

Then we always had a few pranksters about. I remember one student who, when he was studying French, didn't do his work. On one occasion when he came out, I was in the hall. He came out of French class and the teacher stood there taking up the written work for the day. When this student came along, the teacher extended her hand and he stopped and shook hands with her and then went along! Without handing in any papers! (laughter) Of course, he was called to the office and required to do the work.

R Mr. Bergerson, would you like to tell me about some of your personal life; anything you'd like to talk about; your child, your family?

B Yes, I would be glad to if you consider it appropriate. But I would be perfectly willing to have it struck off the tape.

I had one son, born June 25, 1923. He attended the schools here and graduated in 1939 as the Valedictorian of his class. He came back for post-graduate work because he was only 16 at the time.

Then he went to Rochester University. He entered Rochester University in 1940 and attended classes there for two years until April 10th of the third year when he was called into the service. He had enlisted previously but wasn't called until April 10, 1943. He had already completed, in two years and eight months, all the requirements for graduation. So he was graduated in 1943 although he would have been the class of 1944. Of course he was not present for his own graduation because he was in the service. He was entered in the Air Force in training for meteorology and took his basic training down in Boca Raton, Florida. Then he was sent to the University of Chicago where he had a Master's Degree in Science, and completed the training in meteorology. He was appointed as Second Lieutenant and was stationed at Bradley Airfield for a time and then he was sent to Greenland. He was meteorology officer there until he was discharged in 1946. When he came back in 1946, he entered Columbia University School of International Affairs because he was interested in international affairs and wanted to do what he could to promote peace. He also was a graduate of Russian Institute. He had his Master's Degree in International Affairs and his certificate from the Russian Institute, and then completed all his work for his doctorate except his thesis. Then he was appointed a Rotary Fellow, and went to France and studied in the University of Paris. After he had completed his year, he took six months to travel through the countries of Europe that were recovering from the war (WW II) to see the conditions which had been created by the war. He came back and spent some time at Columbia University and then went to the University of Denver to teach International Affairs. And he taught, for a short time, Political Science in the City of New York. Then he went to Washington as the Chief of the Yugoslav Division of the Voice of America. He was there for 14 years and then he was transferred to the New York Office of the Voice of America where he was Program Chairman for Eastern Europe, all the countries of Eastern Europe, and arranged programs for all of those countries. He continued in that until November 29 of this year (1979) when he died as the result of surgery. He had a good career and I think he did a very good job for the government and carried on under considerable difficulty.

I have received numbers of letters from the State Department and from the Voice of America. People with whom he had been associated in his work, expressing their sympathy at my loss. But he, I think, accomplished a great deal in the number of years that he lived. He died at the age of 56. But he did have the opportunity to do the kind of work that he wanted to do for his country.

R Mr. Bergerson, would you like to tell us of some of your activity in Rotary?

B Yes. I became a member of the Rotary Club in August 1922. The Club was organized on May 21, 1922 and I came in in August of that particular year. I have been a member of the Rotary from that time to the present. I was President of the Rotary Club in 1925 and I have served continuously in the Club, on one committee or another, up to the present time. I was Chairman of the Student Loan Fund that we organized in 1933 to loan money to students that needed help to go through college. I was Chairman of that from 1933 until 1960 as a matter of fact. During that period of years, it was very hard for a student to get money to go on to college. Money wasn't as freely found as it is now with both state and federal funds available. Students found it difficult to get the money to go and we loaned money to the students which they were required to pay back after they left college. No interest was charged until they left college, and then the interest was four percent. Through the period of years, we loaned money to a great many students. During the period, I was the Chairman of the funds. I had only one case in which the student did not pay back the money he had borrowed. This speaks a lot, I think, for the students that were getting the money.

I think that today, perhaps, the big loans by the government, both state and federal, sometimes gives the students the impression that money is just for them. Some of them do not assume the responsibility in paying it back because it happens to be tax money that is owed to the state and to the federal government rather than to an individual, or to a Rotary Club. I think that is probably detrimental to the program, although now I know the government is making considerable effort to collect the money from those who don't pay back. Of course, it involves only a small percentage

of the students but I think for the sake of their integrity that they should be required to pay the money back and it should be followed up to see that it is paid back, unless there were some circumstances that made it absolutely impossible. So, I have continued in the Rotary Club for all these years. Last year, I was made a Paul Harris Fellow and that comes about by the contribution of the Rotary Clubs contributing \$1,000.00 to the Rotary Foundation in honor of the individual. The Rotary Fund, of course, is the Fund where students are loaned money to take a year of college, an undergraduate year in a foreign country, or do graduate work in a foreign country. Money has been loaned by the Foundation to a great many students. In the first group, there were only 18 students. My son was in the second group and there were 25 in that group. Now there are hundreds of them studying in many countries.

There is a special fund in the Rotary Foundation for teachers who are preparing to teach mentally retarded students and are given special education in universities where the work is exceptional in that respect. They also pay for businessmen to spend a couple of months in a foreign country studying the industries in some particular city or village - with a return visit of people in that village to the American city that sent them. So there is a great deal of good being done by the Rotary Foundation, not only in education but in many other particulars.

They have given money for relief under certain circumstances or tragedies that have occurred in various countries, and they continue to educate these people feeling that it is a practical way to emphasize the objective of Rotary in promoting international peace and fellowship to all the peoples of the world. A Rotary Fellow who does go, is required to visit the Rotary Clubs in the area where he is and to speak whenever they ask him to tell about the United States and its government. When he returns, he is committed to visit the Rotary Clubs in his District who want him to speak about his experiences in the foreign country. In that way, our communities learn more about the foreign countries and understand more the problems that they have, as well as the foreign countries that are visited by the Rotary Fellow come to learn far more about America. It does promote a

sense of fellowship and a feeling of a desire for peace throughout all the nations of the world. And that is performing a very valuable function.

I hope that I have given an accurate picture of what the Rotary International accomplishes in the world.

(end of side I of taped interview)

R Mr. Bergerson, I would like to know what you can tell me about your association with the Swan Library ( in Albion, N.Y.)

E I was a member of the Swan Library Board for 43 years serving first as Secretary, and later as President of the Board.

Mr. and Mrs. Swan left some \$35,000.00 to the library and with this sum the present library was purchased. In the years that I served on the Board, we had an income of about \$7,800.00 to operate the library. In spite of the limited income, the library rendered excellent service. We received \$4,100.00 a year from the Town of Gaines and the Town of Albion.

Miss Achilles was appointed the first librarian and continued in office for more than a quarter of a century.

Judge Issac Signor was the first President of the library and continued to serve until he passed away. He was followed in that office by his son, Charles Signor who (also) served until he passed. Francis Blake then took over as President and served for a number of years. When he resigned, I took over the duties of President and continued in the office until I resigned, some 12 years later. George Wolfe, who had succeeded me as Secretary of the Board, then became President.

Willis G. Carmer, who was Superintendent of School when the library was established, was the Secretary of the Board until his resignation of the office of Superintendent of Schools in 1925. I succeeded him as Secretary and continued until I became the President of the Board. George Wolfe succeeded me as Secretary and continued until my resignation and then became the President of the Board.

Miss Achilles was a very precise person and did not like salacious books or magazines in the library. If she did not feel that a book or a magazine article was proper, she would remove

it from circulation and set it aside. Mr. Carmer had a great sense of humor. He might go down on a Sunday afternoon and pick up one of the banned books, and circulate it among his friends. Because of her irritation of this procedure, when I became Secretary of the Board she demanded that I turn my key in to the library! I was amused with this tactic, but willingly gave her the key.

Today the library has much better financial support. The last years I was President of the Board, the school district contributed \$6,000.00 for the support of the library. This now has been increased to \$10,000.00, and in addition there are contributions from the County and other public funds. Needless to say, the money has been well spent and the library services have been augmented.

A great deal of credit should go to Miss Achilles, Miss Lucy Fancher and Mrs. Robert Moore for the excellent services they rendered while serving at pitifully small salaries. Theirs was a service of love. Mrs. Curtis Lyman, the present librarian, is doing an excellent job at upgrading the services of the Swan Library. She has more personnel to help her with the work, and greater funds to provide greater services

The library renders a great service to the community. It has added many functions that the library in its beginning did not have.

R Mr. Bergerson, could you tell me about your church membership and your activities in the church?

B I became a member of the Presbyterian Church in 1925, so I have been a member of the church for 55 years. I have been more or less active during these 55 years. I had the Young People's Department for a number of years and I also had the Men's Class for a number of years. I served on the Session for some 25 years. The Rev. Earl I. Hamlin and family came here in 1925 and he served as the minister for the church for 25 years or more. He was a very active man in the community and his wife Maryanne was very active in the community also. Rev. Hamlin not only served the church but he served the community in many capacities. He was interested in Child Welfare and he was interested in con-

tributions that were to the neglected and poor people of the community. He was often an agent for securing better conditions for some of those families. Mrs. Hamlin served in the church and worked with the young people. She also taught a class. She worked for the Young People's Society over a period of years. She was active, very active in community affairs. She was particularly active in Missionary affairs. She also organized the Young Women's Service Club which operates to this day and performs many functions of service and helps to support students in college with a scholarship program.

After Earl Hamlin left, we had a new succession of ministers. Rev. Donaldson was our minister for ten years, and he was followed by Rev. Howard Rose who was our minister for six years. He was followed by our present minister, James Hughes.

During the earlier years, I sang in the choir for a number of years. So I have had more or less a very pleasant and active experience in the church over the period of years. It has been a very pleasant association with a great many people.

R Could you tell me, Mr. Bergerson, about the organist you have?

E The organist? In the early years we had Bert Griswold for quite a number of years. After Bert Griswold's death, we had Mrs. Helen Woods for a period of years. After she retired from the work Mrs. Roy Merrill was organist. Then we had a young couple come in here: Moses Sherman, who was a music instructor, and his wife, who was an active teacher in the schools of the place from which they came. Moses directed the choir and Margaret Sherman did the music. They were a wonderful couple! They received a salary of about \$800.00 for the joint services as choir director and organist, but it was all turned back to the church as part of their pledge during all the years that they were here. Now we have Paul Crowder as organist and as director of the choir. It requires a good deal more financial assistance than we required by the Shermans.

... Remembering Mr. and Mrs. Sherman, the music was excellent and the anthems and other music selections at Christmas programs and Easter programs were very unusual indeed. Margaret's father

was a Presbyterian minister for a great many years. He was born and brought up in Scotland and worked for a tea company there and finally became convinced that he should enter the ministry. So he studied for the ministry in the Presbyterian Church and he came to this continent and was Missionary Minister to churches in Nova Scotia, I believe. He had more than one parish and he traveled from one parish to another on snow-shoes. And he spent a considerable period up there. He was there, well, I don't know how many years, but it must have been 25 years or more before he came to the United States. Then he had a congregation in northern New York (State). One of them, I believe, was in Coventry, New York and he continued as minister for more than 50 years. When he retired, he came here (to Albion, N.Y.) to live because their daughter was the only child and they wanted to be near her. His wife's health was not very good after she came here, and after they had been here for a number of years, she died. He continued to live in an apartment by himself even after the Sherman's moved north. He had a hard time trying to decide to go where they were, or whether to remain here. He finally decided to remain here. He was a regular attendant at the Presbyterian Church here, and on occasion when the minister was gone, he would substitute in the pulpit. He was a very sturdy old gentleman and he had very definite ideas about religion. He was very faithful in carrying on his duties as a minister. I used to be with him occasionally. We would go out to lunch together and we would have long visits about his experiences in the church. I asked him once how he liked retirement. And he said, "I don't call it retirement; I call it experiment". He was a very fine old gentleman and I enjoyed friendship with him as long as he lived here. Unfortunately one morning they found him on the floor. He had died of a heart attack. He was buried here. His daughter has written a book about him. She visited Scotland, talked with his relatives and people who knew him in his early years. She also made a visit to Nova Scotia and got information there. She wrote a book about him and it can be found in the Swan Library. It is a very interesting book and well worth reading. ... The title of the book that Margaret Sherman wrote about her father is



The Pastor to the OutPost. ... The name of Margaret Sherman's father was Rev. McKirdy.

R Thank you Mr. Bergerson.

(end of taped interview)

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Mr. Carl Bergerson was interviewed by Mrs. Marjorie C. Radzinski for the Orleans County Historical Association, Oral History Project.

The original transcription of this tape was by Luther P. Burroughs of Albion, New York.

After additions and deletions were made by Mr. Bergerson, final editing and typing was done by Helen McAllister, Medina, N.Y.

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