

Lancaster County Historical Society
Oral History Project

Interviewee: Harris C. Arnold

Interviewer: Tom Roy

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I: My name is Tom Roy and we're doing a Lancaster County oral history interview and talking to Harris C. Arnold. Mr. Arnold is going to tell us briefly first of all before I go into any questions about April firsts in Lancaster County, how it used to be, and maybe in a lot of ways how it still is.

H: No, it has largely died out. What I'm going to talk about has largely died out because of modern methods of doing business.

I: Now I'll admit to you that there's at least two years difference in our ages. So that you're going to have to fill me in on what April, first of all what time period are you talking about when you say April first?

H: I'm talking about the period of which I was acquainted from say 1910 to when it faded out in the 1930's. But of course it had been in existence for many years before that.

I: Would you say back into 1850?

H: I would suppose so, I have no knowledge about that I have some pictures here that show the crowds downtown in 1901, and 1903 which typify exactly what I'm going to talk about.

I: So what we're talking about, we can say safely, is at least a period of time from 75 to 80 years of an event that took place yearly in Lancaster County.

H: I assume it was that long.

I: What happened on April first?

H: Well it was a phenomena which was in Lancaster County, and may have been in other counties in southeastern Pennsylvania, but I'm not acquainted with them. It was a day, the day of the year by custom and tradition when all real estate business, transactions took place, deeds were made, properties were transferred, leases began and ended, farmers settled with their tenants and it was a congestion of business which had grown up for reasons that were logical in this community. The economy of Lancaster county the farther back you go, the much greater was its agricultural economy. And April one was a convenient time for changing ownerships in farms and occupancies of farms, it was intimate

for the new many to plant his crops they, farmers from the year before probably had been paid for their tobacco crops.

I: So what you're saying was , cause the next question I was going to ask you was how did we arrive at this April 1 deadline. I was thinking maybe because April 15th was the tax deadline or something. But that would have gone back to the calendar year.

H: This was long before the tax season.

I: Primarily this came about because the great percentage of the county's revenue and involvement was in agriculture. And it was in a sense the new year for farmers.

H: It was the end of the fiscal year for our farmers if you want to call it that.

I: The new beginning the spring coming along.

H: And with that the great prevalence of that, many other transactions followed in it's train. The streets of Lancaster were full on April first of people moving from one house to another in the City of Lancaster. Leases began and ended on April one. That was it. Incidentally, to show its agricultural contact, my mother was from Salem NJ. She says there was sort of a day on the 23rd of March in Salem NJ because crops are at least ten days to two weeks earlier down there.

I: That's right. That is right, sure. So in other words, this was not only, April first was the day in Lancaster County, I guess if you went further north in Potter County you may have a later date.

H: Possibly but I have never heard of the great massive congestion on one day. Of course I've not had the experience of it, but I've never heard of it elsewhere.

I: You don't have to answer this, but the period of time you're talking about, how old were you when this was going on? In what span of your lifetime?

H: Aged 10 I became an errand boy in the office of my father who was a lawyer. On April first there was always a school holiday on the first week of april and it was the busiest day for lawyers the whole year. My mother once said from the first of January till the first of April my father wasn't fit ot live with because of the pressure that was on lawyers to get ready for April first business. There were no title companies here all titles land title were searched for by lawyers, and the pressure was terrific because it centered on that one day. Some it tapered off on the second of April or third but it probably was unnecessarily centered on that day out of habit.

I: Now I'll go off on a tangent. So you started out at about 10, and I guess that's the way you became a lawyer, or one of the ways that, in other words, the training for a lawyer started off early for a young man.

H: I was there just as an errand boy at age 10. But my father was an old time lawyer, and I grew into becoming very helpful to him. I stayed in Lancaster for high school, I went to Franklin and Marshall college, and so I was here during the years, all through college years and April first became a participation day for me as I got old enough to do so.

I: It took on great meaning for you in your life.

H: Then after six years absence in law school and so forth, I came back and it was still a big day, diminishingly so.

I: Now you said early on in our conversation some of the kind of things that took place, deed transfers, leases, etc. What happened, and you said your mother said your father was unfit to live with from the beginning of January to April first.

H: Yes.

I: As you got closer to April first and everybody was making ready for this. Let's take the week the April first, the week preceding April first. What kind of, I'm trying to get a feel for the kind of busyness and turmoil that was taking place, what took place?

H: Well, from the beginning of the year a lawyer had so many clients that were going to buy real estate, and he searched the titles, well title searching is a time consuming matter, and therefore, you had that pressure to get them done and be ready. Then the [door] lawyer prepared deeds and he prepared mortgages, and just the volume of it was a matter of pressure to be ready. Plus the fact that you had to deal with numerous people.

I: The courthouse must have been a riotous scene.

H: The courthouse was riotous, but an orderly riotous. The whole downtown was, the banks were full, there were eleven downtown banks when I was ten years old, two others were organized later, they were full and opened till eight or nine o'clock at night. Three o'clock was the official closing time. The courthouse books were blocked off, where they had to add eight or ten extra clerks in every office that had them.

I: Bring in people part time to help out?

H: Part timers, the banks, all the old time bankers who retired or knew anything about being a banker were back of the counters in the bank days. And so, I have some snapshots that were taken by Ferdinand Demuth, Charles H. Demuth, the artist's father. All down and around the corner here, which show the crowds.

I: The massive crowds of people. What happened on April first? Tell me what happened to you and your colleagues that day.

H: Let me use a transaction perhaps.

I: Fine that's good.

H: John Smith is buying a farm, and he's going to have a mortgage given to him by his neighbor Henry Jones because the national banks couldn't take mortgages then and there was very little mortgage work in the banks. So it was all among individuals practically. So, Mr. Jones was going to lend the money to my client, but he already has his money out on a mortgage that was due that day. So the person who owed the money had to be in town to pay him off, and then he comes to my office to provide the money for the purchase of the farm for my client. That meant three sets of people, from three lawyers offices.

I: For that transaction.

H: For that one transaction. And it could have been multiplied into four or five people, so that by seven thirty in the morning people began to arrive in lawyer's offices and if there were through by seven o'clock at night they were lucky. And the tie outs were tremendous and people sat for several hours at a time waiting for something to be done in another office. When the errand boy took [tape goes silent for a few seconds] recording mortgages, and satisfying mortgages, that were being paid off, going to the banks, and it was the day.

I: Do your preparation ahead of time and then collect it all, and reap the harvest.

H: And apart from the lawyers offices, the farm owner who had a tenant, who were on the shares, the tobacco had been sold and the grain crops which hadn't been consumed on the farm were sold probably in the spring time and there were adjustments to be made between the landlord and the tenant, and they came to town, for their bank books.

I: Who was minding the store? Everybody in the county was in Lancaster it seems in that day.

H: There were many people. Well one reason why it was one day was that a trip to the city was an event. Of course in my day the trolley cars were running but still there were plenty of farm people who were far off from the trolley cars. And so they drove to town with their horses and buggies, and put their horses in the stables at the downtown hotels, there was the leopard hotel, and the county house, and the Franklin house.

I: Were they called the livery, did you say take the horse to the livery, or just say take it to the Franklin House?

H: No, a livery is where you rented a horse. They may have rented horses in the other days.

I: this was a parking garage.

H: they parked their horses there, but that word hadn't been coined yet. And the town, I have a picture showing buggies, for which there's no room in the leopard hotel yard, parked along north duke street from east king to grant street. Straps tied to the one, tucked tight under the rear of another, and I don't know how they got the one out of the middle till the end of the day.

I: Double parking, right?

H: No no, straight down the street, not double parking. So that that was the situation...

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