Oral History Interview
Harry Bernstein
WH085
(written transcript and digital audio)

On August 13, 2010, Harry Bernstein was interviewed at the Henry Inman Library by Brenda Velasco at 11:00 A.M.

Brenda Velasco: I have a long time Woodbridge resident, Harry Bernstein. He has also been involved in education and all this will come about through the interview. Harry, welcome, I’m glad you agreed to the interview.

1. Identify individual-name, section, date of birth.
Harry Bernstein: My name is Harry Bernstein. I spent thirty years in Woodbridge Proper and thirty-three years now in Colonia and I was born on 12/13/46.
Brenda Velasco: And that was Friday the thirteenth you told me before?
Harry Bernstein: Yes, it was. It was a lucky day for me.
Brenda Velasco: Well we’re lucky to have you here.

2. How long have you lived in Woodbridge?
Brenda Velasco: So you’ve basically lived in Woodbridge all your life?
Harry Bernstein: Yes, sixty-three years. My grandfather moved here from Scranton, Pennsylvania somewhere around 1920 and he opened a grocery store on the corner of Fulton Street and Main Street and the family lived above the grocery store (Main Market). He also had an ice store way back before electric refrigerators. He used to sell ice to people; and his father and brothers used to deliver ice. People would keep it under their refrigerator and keep their food cold. That building is still there on Pearl Street.
Brenda Velasco: That was the ice store that you’re talking about.
Harry Bernstein: The ice store building is still there. It became the Woodbridge Post Office for a few years on Pearl Street and now it’s something else. It’s colored purple actually.
Brenda Velasco: And it’s right across from the train station now.
Harry Bernstein: Yes.

3. Why did you or your family originally move to Woodbridge?
Brenda Velasco: Why did he move from Scranton in the 1920s?
Harry Bernstein: I guess just for a better opportunity. More things were happening here in New Jersey and in New York so he had the grocery store. Also around 1937 and 1938, my father got together with a few other fellows from Woodbridge and they started the first aid squad on Brook Street. My father was a member of that squad for forty years when he passed away. He was president of the squad for six years and soon after Port Reading squad and the Iselin squad started. Now there are first aid squads all around the township.
Brenda Velasco: So your family has been heavily involved with the growth of Woodbridge then, too.

Harry Bernstein: Yes, we also had a car business. My uncle, my father’s brother, started a Desoto/Plymouth/Chrysler business in Perth Amboy. We had a used car lot where the 7Eleven is across the street from the Reo Diner. That used to be our lot. We had used cars. People would come and buy used cars from us there.

Brenda Velasco: You’ve been a mainstay in Woodbridge Proper: your family.

Harry Bernstein: Yes.

4. What physical changes have occurred over the years in the area you lived? -houses, streets, services, stores, houses of worship, schools, etc.

Brenda Velasco: So then you’ve seen a lot of physical changes that have occurred and because we’re interviewing during the summer we’re at this library. But eventually, I hope, we can walk down Main Street and have a walking tour one time with you when the weather is much cooler. But what were some of the physical changes that you saw?

Harry Bernstein: Well, in the 1950s the Board of Education built many elementary schools in Woodbridge. During the ‘50s and ‘60s there was a boom in population here in Woodbridge Township with easy access to New York with the train and housing boom. So they built a lot of elementary schools, junior high schools and we called them junior high schools at that time. Also in 1964 or 1965 JFK High School was built and opened. Years later Colonia High School was opened so that was big (1967). In Woodbridge, the St. James Church built a beautiful new church on the grounds where the old church was. In the late ‘40s or early ‘50s, the Jewish community moved from a little synagogue on School Street right across the street from the Woodbridge Firehouse. There was a tiny little synagogue there and they moved to a bigger one on Amboy Avenue. On Route #1 we used to have Costa’s Ice Cream. They left Woodbridge somewhere in the ‘60s or ‘70s and Hagan Das came in for a while so we had always had ice cream here in Woodbridge which was nice.

Brenda Velasco: But two different locations though.

Harry Bernstein: Two different locations, yes. Hagan Das was near the Girl’s Vocational School by Strawberry Hill and Costa’s was down on Route #1 in pretty much Avenel.

Brenda Velasco: What about Main Street?

Harry Bernstein: Well downtown Main Street there was a lot of shopping to do there. My mother bought all of her house dresses at Christensen’s or Choper’s.; these were two clothing stores. Christensen’s was a huge store. You could get your Cub Scout outfits and needs there also. Choper’s was a smaller clothing store just down a little bit on the corner of Main and William. There’s a restaurant there now. The original Bowl Mor bowling alley, you may not even know this, was on Amboy Avenue across from the new Dunkin Donuts there not far from the Reo Diner and the building is still there; that’s where we used to go bowling. There were only eight or ten lanes there. Of course now they moved to their current position on upper Main Street. We had Handraham’s Fish Market. That’s where people bought their fish right on Main Street. We had Mrs. Zelintuk’s women’s hat store. We had
Woolworth’s 5&10 where we could get everything. Also they had a great soda fountain there with swivel red chairs and often you had to stand and wait behind someone until they were done eating so you could get a seat. It was such a popular place to go get some ice cream or a hamburger; I have a menu here which shows some of the prices which is really unbelievable. You could get a malted milk for twenty-five cents, a banana split for twenty-five cents, fresh orange juice for thirty cents, bacon and tomato sandwich on toast for fifty cents, chicken salad sandwich sixty-five cents, ham salad sandwich thirty cents…….

Brenda Velasco: Meals under a dollar.

Harry Bernstein: This was 1957. Apple pie, a cut of apple pie, for fifteen cents and the ice cream sodas were just so good. As I say you waited in line to get a seat at good old Woolworth’s. Mr. Dahl was the proprietor of Woolworth’s. He wore a bowtie everyday and it was just a great store. When you needed scotch tape or tacks or whatever, you went there. There was also a placed called Tier’s Hardware Store, on School Street almost across the street from the Administration building and Tier’s was an original hardware store. It was small and there’s an accountant there now in the building. It’s on the corner of James and School Street; it had a wooden floor and it was from ceiling to floor just stocked with everything a hardware store should have but as I said it was small. There were no Home Depots at the time and it was just a really neat place to go in and walk around and see the hardware that was there. Also another cool place that I loved was Gioffre’s Shoe Repair on Main Street right across from my grandfather’s grocery store. The cool thing about Gioffre’s Shoe Repair was when you walked in there was another wooden floor off to the left where you got to the counter. Off to the left, were little booths with foot stands and you would sit there and put your foot up and they would come and look at your shoe and do whatever; it was just an original shoe repair store. It was really cool and it smelled from shoe polish; it was really neat. Also on the corner of Main Street and Amboy Avenue right next to the Reo Diner there used to be a hotel, a two story hotel. Somewhere around the early ‘50s I believe, mid ‘50s (1957), a gentleman who was staying at the hotel was smoking a cigarette, fell asleep, burnt the hotel down and he died in the fire; now there are some stores there. Also, getting back to the Woolworth’s 5&10, next door to the 5&10 was the A&P and the neat thing about the, in addition to all the shopping that you would need for food, there was a wooden floor and it smelled from the A&P coffee. You would walk towards the coffee and just breathe it in because it smelled so good. I’m not even a coffee drinker and I just loved the smell of the coffee there and the A&P was really neat. Later on, somewhere around the late ‘50s or early ‘60s, I believe the Mutual Supermarket opened up. It is now Berkeley College down there near the Town Hall in Woodbridge and it looks just like it did then except now it’s a college. But that was a huge supermarket. It was like the first really big, you know, ten or twelve aisles of shopping that you could do. A lot of people, including my mother, switched from the A&P to the Mutual. Also our favorite place on Main Street, in the ‘50s and ‘60s, was the New Yorker Restaurant. San Remo Pizza is there now but the New Yorker Restaurant had great opened turkey sandwiches and open roast beef sandwiches; they just had the best French fries in the world that was the New Yorker Restaurant. There was also a men’s clothing store, you could buy a suit there right
on Main Street. Of course the original bank is still there. It’s a different business now but you could see the original **First Bank of Woodbridge** right in the middle of Main Street. There was also, on School Street as you turned off of Main Street, **Pat’s Barbershop** where a lot of us went to get our hair done. There were basically two or three places to get your hair done for guys and **Pat’s** had about three barbers there on School Street. One of his barbers really left him and went down the street in a little, little wooden store that’s still there and he had his own barbershop there, **Rudy’s**, somewhere in the ‘60s. That building, which is still there on School Street, just on the other side of the Administration building, it’s empty now, it used to be a candy store. When we were in the first grade we walked from the Administration building which was School #1 where we went to school. We would walk over to this little store and buy the little strip candies and the little banana candies and they were a penny each. It must have been the first candy store in Woodbridge. It makes me remember also that, this wasn’t on Main Street, but over in front of Woodbridge High School just off to the left, if you were looking at Woodbridge High School on what is now a lawn in front of, it’s probably a parking lot in front of the library, was the only toy store called **Dooley’s Toy Store**. Mr. Dooley was a Woodbridge fireman, he had this toy store. It had a wooden floor and the bell would ring when you opened the door and he had a lot of toys in there. It would be small by today’s standard but I still have some games that we bought at **Dooley’s** and if you wanted to see Santa Claus in Woodbridge you went to **Dooley’s Toy Store**. I think it was Mr. Dooley, I’m not positive, but I think he might have been Santa Claus. But that was the place to go for toys. There was no other place in the 1950s.

**Brenda Velasco:** So Woodbridge was rather self-contained then?

**Harry Bernstein:** Yes.

**Brenda Velasco:** With shopping?

**Harry Bernstein:** Yes, you really could get everything in town. We had several bakeries. We had **Parnes Bakery** which was right on Main Street and they had good pastries, good challahs and they were right in the middle of Main Street. But we also had the **Cookie Jar Bakery** which is still there. It’s called **La Bonbonneire** now but it still has the name **Cookie Jar** next to it. The **Cookie Jar** was known not only for its great pastries but its tremendous jelly donuts. My friends were altar boys at St. James and between mass used to run across the street and get a quick donut. I have to tell you that if you went into the **Cookie Jar** in days past and got a jelly donut you had to get three because by the time you got home you may have eaten one or two already in the car and you’d be sorry you didn’t buy more. The dough was so great and the powder on it was so great but also the jelly. I don’t know where they got the jelly but it was so special and it was just the best jelly donut I’d ever had in the whole world.

**Brenda Velasco:** I’m going to stop you with the food. It’s almost lunch time and we’re not going to get good jelly donuts.

**Harry Bernstein:** Yes, true. Just a last couple of things, of course the **Reo Diner** has been there forever and “Meet me at the Reo” people took that seriously. All the kids I graduated with, when they come back to Woodbridge, they all must go to the **Reo Diner** because they remember eating there after dates or bowling or going to a movie. When you went to a movie we had a movie theatre in town called the **State Movie**
Theatre right next to Town Hall when we were little in the late 1940s and the 1950s. We all went to the State Movie Theatre and saw two movies and they tore it down; and there’s a convenience store there now. But a lot of time we went into Perth Amboy to The Strand or several other movie theatres; they had about three movie theatres in Perth Amboy. We could take a bus in and go see the movie. I also remember the Masonic Temple which is still there on Green Street and the reason I remember the Masonic Temple so well is my father being a first aider they used to bowl before they started with the Woodbridge Bowl Mor. They used to bowl against the Woodbridge police and the Woodbridge fire company in the basement of the Masonic Temple. There were maybe five or six bowling lanes in the basement and they had pin setter boys; there was no automatic pin setter. The boys used to stay down there and set the pins up in between the ball knocking the pins down. There was also, in the 1960s, there was a library boom when they started building libraries. One of the original sites for the library was over on Rahway Avenue across from what was the Mayfair Pizza. Now it’s the Mulberry Tree Restaurant. Also where the Cameo was which is now Arianna’s, that was a library in the 1960s and now of course we have a library in every section and we have a wonderful library system here in town. The last thing I want to mention was pizza at Montecalvo’s. Whenever anybody comes back, my cousin from St. Louis was in the other day and we drove by Montecalvo’s Pizza. He said, oh my gosh we went here all the time. It’s now the Mulberry Tree Restaurant but you always went to Montecalvo’s for a great pizza and whether you ordered out or you sat there and they had great birch beer. It’s right on Rahway Avenue and it was just wonderful.

Brenda Velasco: So you have happy memories?
Harry Bernstein: Oh, yes.
Brenda Velasco: When the A&P opened and your father had his grocery store, did that hurt your father?
Harry Bernstein: My grandfather. I don’t know, I think the grocery store was gone by the time the A&P opened.
Brenda Velasco: Oh, okay.
Harry Bernstein: Because the grocery store was back in the 1920s and I’m not sure when that all ended. You know, he might have retired, before the A&P came. But my uncle, my father’s brother, one of his brothers, used to deliver from the grocery store in a horse and buggy he told me. He kidded me, but I think it was true, that if he dawdled too long delivering the groceries the horse would take the buggy back to the grocery store. So he had to get his money and get back in the buggy real quick or the horse would just go home.
Brenda Velasco: And he’d have to walk.
Harry Bernstein: Yes.
Brenda Velasco: Your grandfather had it trained right.
Harry Bernstein: Yes.

5. What public buildings/property were there? - post office, library, parks, firehouse, schools, etc.

Brenda Velasco: You mentioned the post office before. The post office was in your grandfather’s ice house at one time?
Harry Bernstein: No, after it was the ice house, years later, I don’t know what it was, it might have just been empty. The Woodbridge Post Office took it over and it was there for many years. I believe it was in the late ‘50s or early ‘60s that they built the current post office which is on Main Street. So that’s where the Woodbridge Post Office was for many years.

Brenda Velasco: Okay, and we mentioned about the library. How about parks?
Harry Bernstein: There were plenty of parks around. We played our football games as kids in the Woodbridge Park by the creek not far from the Reo Diner. We’d go over there and it was an open park space and that’s where we played our football every day after school.

Brenda Velasco: What schools did you attend?
Harry Bernstein: I went to, where the Administration building is now, School #1 it was called then. That was first through fourth grade I think and then I went to School #11 for fifth and sixth grade. School #11 which is still there, the Ross Street School, and I had a teacher by the name of Mr. Horne who is related to Lena Horne. Then I went on to Woodbridge Junior High School which it was called at that time.

Brenda Velasco: Where was that located?
Harry Bernstein: That’s on Barron Avenue and then we went to the new Woodbridge High School and we were on half day session so as a sophomore, we stayed through the ninth grade on Barron Avenue, we went in as sophomores and we went to school in the afternoon. I used to sleep until nine o’clock in the morning, get up and do my last minute homework and walk to school around eleven thirty and get there around twelve or twelve fifteen. My class was the biggest class ever to graduate a Woodbridge school. It was the Class of 1964. We had one thousand one hundred and seventy-seven graduates in 1964. It took us over an hour to march in eight abreast to graduation. But we used to sit in the auditorium and we filled up the entire auditorium while the older kids were dismissed then we went to our homerooms out of the auditorium because we all couldn’t fit in the school at the same time. This was just a year before Kennedy High School was built. So then we went to class and the unusual thing about that was the hallways were still crowded somewhere around four or four-thirty and it would get dark out and you’d be in school and it would be pitch dark outside by your last period of school. So you’d be walking home in the pitch dark. It was kind of weird but, you know, before daylight savings time it got dark.

Brenda Velasco: Yes, especially in the winter.
Harry Bernstein: Yes.
Brenda Velasco: And the firehouse was always there?
Harry Bernstein: The Woodbridge Firehouse was always there.
Brenda Velasco: And your father was part of the first aid. He had found the first aid squad.
Harry Bernstein: Right, back in ’37 or ’38.
Brenda Velasco: Where was that originally located?
Harry Bernstein: That’s right across from the Woodbridge Fire Company on Brook Street. It’s now empty. They moved to a bigger building and combined with the Iselin squad right off the Iselin circle. But it was nice having the first aid squad right across the street from the firehouse. The firemen and the first aiders became very
friendly with each other and helped each other out once in a while. It was very nice. Memorial Day was particularly nice. The sons and daughters of the first aiders, when we were tiny little kids, we used to march in the Memorial Day parade behind our fathers. They were dressed in their coveralls and we carried a banner that said, and I still have a picture of it, that’s our dads up ahead. It was the cutest thing. We’d get back to the first aid squad and the firehouse after the parade and the firemen always had hotdogs and birch beer and served everybody from the first aid squad and firehouse that were in the parade. It was just a wonderful memory. You were proud of your father; we were all proud of our fathers being in the first aid and fire department. You know, they’d run in the middle of the night to go save somebody’s life. It was just great. We all knew how to read the whistle that blew. Before the plectrum radio whistles would blow and you could hear it everywhere throughout Woodbridge Proper. You would count the number of whistles and it would tell you whether it was a first aid call or whether it was a fire call. Then soon somewhere around the late ‘50s or early ‘60s we all got plectrum radios in our houses and a fellow by the name of Mr. Van Tassel, his brother owned the Van Tassel Bar on Main Street, but Mr. Van Tassel was a full time fireman and he would come on the plectrum radio. He would say Woodbridge Fire headquarters to Woodbridge Emergency Squad ambulance calling and if it was an emergency he would add the word emergency and you heard that. We had the plectrum in our living room and you could hear it throughout the house up until eleven o’clock at night he would do that. After eleven o’clock, they called you on the phone and certain people were on-call every eight nights. I remember certain nights when my father went out and came back and went out again three times in a row. Of course, there were the big fires on Main Street when Woolworth’s was on fire and they were out all night with that and of course that hotel fire I mentioned before on the corner by the Reo Diner they were out with that (1957). And of course the train wreck which I will talk about in a little while.

Brenda Velasco: So your father was busy and involved with a lot of things.
Harry Bernstein: Yes.
Brenda Velasco: And as a result you knew about it.
Harry Bernstein: Yes.
Brenda Velasco: You may have been young but you knew about it.

6. What did you do for recreation?
Harry Bernstein: For recreation we didn’t have computers, we didn’t know about huge toys; we didn’t need them. We had a lot of make believe, imagination. One thing I remember doing for recreation was helping your father rake the leaves to the curb and then we would burn the leaves. We were allowed to burn them at that time but there was a beautiful smell of those leaves when they burned. It meant summertime. It was just a great passage time of the summer to rake the leaves. We didn’t have chemicals on our lawns in those days. Everybody had dandelions so you used a push mower. What a workout that was. You’d have to go over the grass several times to cut the lawn and the dandelions. We used any open space where they didn’t build houses yet or in the park and played football after school. Before they built the houses on Hollywood Drive in Woodbridge off of Main Street, it was all
woods, it was all trees. We called it the woods and often we just went into the woods with our toy guns and we played guns, the boys did. We loved the woods.

_Brenda Velasco:_ You had a lot of woods to play in as well, fields.

_Harry Bernstein:_ Yes, fields and woods when we were kids, we did, yes. A lot of them are gone now but some of the parks are still available. There were very few backyard in-ground pools. Nobody had an in-ground pool. You either joined the Ashbrook Swim Club in Colonia, which my family belonged for several years. It was a huge pool. Then when Mr. Gadek, William Gadek, opened up the Gadek Swim Club which is now a steakhouse on Green Street over by Route #9, a lot of us in Woodbridge Proper joined Gadek’s Swim Club. We also, as kids, went up to the new Woodbridge High School baseball field in the heat of the summer when nobody was up there at ninety degrees and we just grabbed a bunch of guys and played baseball all summer right on the Woodbridge High School baseball field. We used to wrestle on the lawns. Nobody was worried about beautiful lawns in those days. We just wrestled right on the lawns. We played pink rubber ball games in the street, bouncing ball games with pink rubber balls. We played wiffle ball which is still big and still around, wiffle balls are, we played that on the lawn. We used to set up on my parent’s front lawn and if you hit it across the street on the neighbor’s front lawn that was a home run. I’ll never forget a fellow by the name of Joey Higgins in my graduating class once hit the ball not only to the lawn but he hit it over the roof of the house across the street which was a mighty blow. Not surprisingly Joey played for Woodbridge High School and Rutgers and had a tryout with the San Francisco Giants. He was a good ball player. He was or is a council person in Scotch Plains or Fanwood just down the street. We did basketball at School No. 1. We went to the new School No. 1 and there was a basketball court and we’d go over there or we’d go over to St. James. Before they built the new church there was an outdoor basketball court and we used to play basketball. We used to flip baseball cards. That was a big activity. We’d spend all night just flipping playing topsies where you throw the card against the wall and if you throw it on top of somebody else’s card you win all that was on the floor. Boy, we would just play that forever in addition to flipping them out of our hand to get heads or tails. We rode bikes. We used to put baseball cards in our spokes so it would make a clickety clack sound. Hopefully you didn’t put Mickey Mantle in your spokes. Some people did, oh boy. And we used to have streamers on our handlebars. If you ask anybody who grew up in the ‘50s about the streamers and you had to have beautiful streamers, it made your bike just feel like a horse. I think it was just something about the streamers flowing in the air as you rode along. So that’s what we did for recreation. We pretty much played on our lawns, on the street and if there was an open field around the block or a park down the street, that’s where we went.

_Brenda Velasco:_ So it was basically unorganized?

_Harry Bernstein:_ Yes, it was unorganized.

_Brenda Velasco:_ Creative?

_Harry Bernstein:_ I never played Little League ball. I kind of wish I did but we just organized it ourselves. We’d call people up or knock on a few doors and we just had a blast. No pressure.

_Brenda Velasco:_ No competition. Your parents weren’t involved.
Harry Bernstein: Right, exactly.
Brenda Velasco: A happy time.
Harry Bernstein: A happy time and happy memories.

7. **What was the focal point of your community at the time?**

Harry Bernstein: Well the focal point of the community really was your home and most of the mothers in the early times pretty much didn’t work. Most of the mothers were home and that was your center there. Your street was a football field. We all played two hand touch in the street with a football. We also developed these pink rubber ball games. Ours was you’d throw it down the street and you had to let it bounce twice before you could catch it. If it bounced three times you lost a point. If you caught it on one bounce you lost a point and that became a big game. I remember cutting the bottom out of a Maxwell House coffee can and tacking it up on the back porch in my backyard and we used to use a pink rubber ball and play basketball trying to get the pink rubber ball into the coffee can. Also we called the field, an open area around the block near the creek on North Park Drive. Instead of the lake, we called it the field and for bigger football games, when we were really going to play tackle, we went around the block to the field and of course we had our bikes. We rode bikes everywhere. Sometimes we’d go on bike hikes, you know, let’s go to the Valentine’s Brick’s yards up on Strawberry Hill. Boy, that was a big bike ride from Woodbridge’s cove! The lake also was around the block from where I lived off Green Street.

Brenda Velasco: Where’s the lake?
Harry Bernstein: The lake is still there. It’s on North Park and South Park Drive in the park section not far from the Reo Diner not far from Gadek’s Steakhouse there. The lake is still there for ice skating. The town has a sign and they tell you whether the ice is thick enough to skate. Of course that was a fun thing to do. We weren’t big ice skaters but we all had our ice skates and we’d get out there in the winter and fall and everything. And as I said the woods, when it was there, boy that was great playing guns and war. Little did we know a lot of friends were going to go off to Vietnam and do the real war thing.

Brenda Velasco: So it was basically your home that was the center?
Harry Bernstein: It was.
Brenda Velasco: And your neighborhood and then you just expanded.
Harry Bernstein: Your neighborhood and maybe the baseball field at Woodbridge High School around there. Ice skating on the lake around the block and the fields and the street were for football. You really didn’t have to go anywhere.

Brenda Velasco: And this was all after the war.
Harry Bernstein: Yes.
Brenda Velasco: After World War II you were growing up.
Harry Bernstein: Yes, I was born in ’46 right after the war.

8. **What did you like about living in your section of Woodbridge?**

Brenda Velasco: Because you lived on top of the store, right?
Harry Bernstein: Well my father lived on top of the grocery store but I always lived on a street called Martool Drive around the block from Green Street. No, actually I lived on Ridgedale Avenue by the White Church up until about the fourth grade in a
duplex. Then around the fourth grade or so we moved to the Green Street area by the lake near Route #1 there. What I loved about Woodbridge on the weekends, Saturday or Sunday, a big treat was to go to Howard Johnson’s on Route #1. It’s a car dealership now but it was a big Howard Johnson’s. It had a neon sign where the little chef was giving pancakes to a dog and the dog’s tail was wagging and it was all in neon and it was exciting to go there because the food was good. It was a big place, it was a big restaurant. Even by today’s standards I would say the Howard Johnson’s was pretty big and the food was good. The open turkey sandwiches were great and for desert everybody got ice cream. They had twenty-eight different flavors of Howard Johnson’s ice cream which I think they still have and everybody was there. I mean everybody in Woodbridge wound up on a Saturday or Sunday pretty much going to Howard Johnson’s if they were going out to eat. It seemed to me that Woodbridge had everything when I was a kid. A big summer trip was a treat and a trip was to go from Woodbridge Proper to Avenel under Route #1 and from Avenel to the Carvel stand which is now a Dairy Maid. On a hot summer’s night, before air conditioning, to go to Carvel and get a Carvel ice cream what a treat! We’d eat it in the car right in the parking lot. Carvel just meant delicious. Then of course I remember getting the first air conditioner. My parents got the first air conditioner and anybody who got an air conditioner they put it in their parent’s bedroom and they got me a cot. Originally I had a cot before I even had some kind of a bed, like an Army cot, but it didn’t matter to me because I got to sleep in the air conditioned room. I can still remember the fresh smell of the air of that air conditioner. It will never smell as good as it did when I was a kid. To smell that air conditioner in my parent’s bedroom to go to sleep on a 90 degree night in that cold room on a cot, what a treat, and to be in the room with my parents it was fun. When we were kids in Woodbridge and we didn’t have something, we just made it up. We played any game you could think of and we’d just make believe. We didn’t need much, maybe a toy gun that was it. We’d be detectives or something.

Brenda Velasco: It wasn’t that expensive was it?
Harry Bernstein: It was not expensive, no. You’d go to Dooley’s Toy Store, get a toy gun and you knew you could play for weeks and weeks.

9. Did you experience any significant happenings in Woodbridge-construction, accidents, sports events, riots, discrimination, etc.

Harry Bernstein: Well the fun things in Woodbridge, during the year, one was the St. James Carnival, their yearly carnival, on the grounds of the old church and that was just a lot of fun. Everybody remembers the great sausage sandwiches that they had there. For the guys we would go there, we were junior high age or whatever, we’d go there and meet girls and you’d comb your hair and dress up and that was just a great, great carnival. It was a big carnival and the main carnival in town outside of St. Cecelia’s carnival which was a good carnival in Iselin which we all went to, too, which was a lot of fun. For a while the Woodbridge Firehouse also had a carnival for a couple of years right on Brook Street between the first aid and the firehouse. I’d never forget the Ferris wheel right on Brook Street and they had something called the Bullet which you got in and twisted you upside down and your hat goes flying. They also had a sound recording booth. This was so long ago I must have been like six
years old or something. They had this recording thing and you could make a record and I still have the record with my mother’s voice on there with me as a little kid singing itsy bitsy spider went up the water spout. You know you would buy this record and what a great gift it was. So they had that for a while, the Woodbridge Firehouse. The clay pits were a great place to play. We all, at one time or another, went up to the clay pits before it became Woodbridge Center. It was just amazing because they took all the clay there to help build the railroads all around several states actually: New York and Connecticut. It was a big business selling clay from Woodbridge and it made big valleys in the clay pit. We used to play guns there and we just had a blast. It was like being on the moon. It was wonderful before Woodbridge Center. And of course we remember when they built Woodbridge Center. In 1951, my father and the first aiders answered a call on Fulton Street, I don’t remember this but I read about it. My mother said he just ran out the door when the whistle blew and of course the story is there was a temporary wooden trestle right on Fulton Street and the train from New York to Red Bank they were supposed to slow down, they got to this wooden trestle and the engineer didn’t slow down and the train rolled down the hill and eighty-eight people were killed. The bodies were lined up on the sidewalk and they started taking some of the bodies over to the Woodbridge First Aid Squad where they made a temporary morgue covering them up with, I think, laundry and brown paper that you put your laundry in which someone donated. My neighbor’s father was a Port Authority policeman and he was a tough guy, cigarette on the side of his mouth, a real tough guy. He went down to help on Fulton Street and we went to pull a person out of a window and it was just an arm that came out and he got a little ill and went home. It was a tough deal that day. That was a bad situation. Other things I remember, in 1964 our basketball team at Woodbridge High School was a tremendous team and we played Trenton High School in our gym which was packed. They must have had twelve hundred people in the gymnasium. It was unbelievable and unfortunately we lost but it was a great basketball game and we used to yell to get the fans involved. Myself and another guy we used to yell every once in a while, AH BAY and all the fans would go WOW, AH BAY, WOW comasubasabay, WOW. And every once in a while we’d get all the pro-runner people doing that and it was just awesome and the basketball games became a big thing at Woodbridge High School. In 1975, I believe it was, my wife and I went back to watch the games at Woodbridge High School because we knew my wife taught some of the kids in Fords Middle School. Four of the kids of the starting five were from Fords Middle School names like Eddie Etzel. The Etzel family had a clothes cleaning business in Fords. Richie Adalin and a couple of other kids from Fords and one boy from Woodbridge Middle. They won it all; they won the Group 4 state championship in 1975. We all bought shirts; it was very exciting. As a very young kid, I must have been six, or seven or eight years old or something, my father used to let me go with the first aid squad and we used to pull up on the football field so the first aiders could be near if somebody got hurt. We used to watch the teams from the 1950s play and they had some good teams; some good players there but it was so exciting to see the big kids playing football. Football was always and still is big, a huge event, at the Woodbridge, JFK and Colonia High Schools for the students to come out and support their team and just being together and showing school spirit.
Back in the day, in the 1950s and 1960s, we didn’t play on Friday nights we played on Saturdays and the big, big game at Woodbridge High School was on Thanksgiving morning vs. Edison High School. That was the big game and the place was packed. Ten o’clock in the morning you’d have to be at Woodbridge High School on Thanksgiving morning. Of course bowling was big, too. Woodbridge maybe the only town that I didn’t know of anywhere that has three bowling alleys: one in Hopelawn, one in Iselin and one in Woodbridge. Bowling is a big, big sport in Woodbridge Township. We have a lot of championship bowlers from all the high schools. Woodbridge High School, particularly the parents who grew up here and their children, became very good bowlers so we have championship teams. The Woodbridge High School’s current bowling coach has more wins than any coach in any other sport, I believe anywhere in New Jersey. He has over eleven hundred wins between the boys and the girls Woodbridge High School bowling teams, eleven hundred plus wins and still counting.

Brenda Velasco: That quite an achievement!

Harry Bernstein: It’s unbelievable. Because the kids bowl, they go bowling, and if you live in Hopelawn and you went to Woodbridge High School you bowled at the Hopelawn bowling aisle. If you lived in Woodbridge Proper you went to Woodbridge Bowl Mor and you went to Woodbridge High School. If you went to Kennedy you’d go to the Iselin bowling aisle which was a cool bowling aisle because the aisles went both ways and they used to have midnight bowling there a long, long time ago. I remember if you got a red headed pin and you hit a strike you got a free game. It was a lot of fun at the Iselin bowling aisle. But bowling is a big, big sport in Woodbridge Township. People fear us around this State.

Brenda Velasco: Anything else you want to cover there?

Harry Bernstein: Um.

Brenda Velasco: I think you did quite well and you captured the spirit and I’m glad you concentrated on some of the sports here as well.

10. What do you like about Woodbridge today?

Brenda Velasco: Because you have not moved out of Woodbridge Township.

Harry Bernstein: No, I love Woodbridge because, and especially under the current Administration we have everything. We have a Community Center, we have ice hockey teams, we have green energy projects which I was always interested in and we have solar panels going up on the Community Center, on the Town Hall and schools. We’re way ahead of the game with solar panels which thirty years ago a lot of people thought solar panels were going to be the future and now Woodbridge is a leader in putting them up. It’s really exciting. We have parks that are preserved and staffed over the summers so kids could go there and play. We have the three bowling aisles that I mentioned before. We have great restaurants all over the township, just fantastic places to eat. You don’t have to go anywhere else. We have Woodbridge Center. It used to be, and maybe it is, the largest shopping center on the East Coast. It’s just a fantastic place to walk around and get exercise, eat and shop. Everything is up there. My favorite place to eat is Chick-Fil A up there. We had great sectional downtown shopping and eating. My son is a particular fan of Indian food and our Iselin section of town, which they call Little India, there are great Indian restaurants.
where he and his wife go to dine. The Indian community has brought the Iselin section of town to life. We also have great musical entertainment behind Woodbridge High School every Monday night in the summer. Fantastic professional groups come and hundreds and hundreds, if not, thousands of people from all over come to see the entertainment that’s there on Monday nights throughout the summer. In addition to entertainment at the Woodbridge Methodist Church this year particularly we have Richie Havens, the great guitar player; we have a Colonia High School graduate, John Gorka, who played once with Peter, Paul and Mary and recorded with them. He’s coming to Woodbridge Methodist Church. I mean right here in town, where do you have to go? We have wellness and fitness programs throughout the township. If you name it, we have it right now and so you really don’t have to go anywhere.

_Brenda Velasco:_ No, once again Woodbridge is self-contained. You may leave your section of Woodbridge but you’ve got the activity there.

11. **Do you still have any family members still living in Woodbridge?**

_Harry Bernstein:_ Everybody is pretty well scattered all over the country right now so my wife and I are............

_Brenda Velasco:_ You’re it.

_Harry Bernstein:_ Pretty much it, yes.

12. **Are there any other stories or events that you would like to discuss?**

_Harry Bernstein:_ Well, you know the things that we were able to get involved in Woodbridge were exciting. We used to have a J.C. organization, Junior Chamber of Commerce. When I was president of the group way back in 1971, we started something called Project Boy and the Woodbridge Armory was nice enough to let us use their facility for free and they gave us an Army truck and we used to go around the township and pick up fatherless boys that we found through the Board of Education. They gave us some information about some boys who would be interested and we picked them up in Army trucks which, for the kids, was very exciting and we brought them to the Armory and we had men play basketball with them and do various activities and that was cool. It was just cool that the Armory and the National Guard was willing to do that right here in Woodbridge with us. In 1968, St. James Church had a priest over there called Father Brian McCormac and I got to know him through a friend of mine. I wound up in a black and white study group at someone’s house where we got to sit with black people and to get to know them. In 1968, that was an unusual thing to do.

_Brenda Velasco:_ The Civil Rights Act had just been passed (1964).

_Harry Bernstein:_ Right, exactly.

_Brenda Velasco:_ And we went through some hot summers there.

_Harry Bernstein:_ Exactly. It was a rough time around that time so we got to break bread with African Americans who lived there in town. Father McCormac challenged some of us who were in the… field to be counselors. He was starting the Bunns Lane housing which was a house right across the street from the Reo Diner which is now a parking lot. They knocked the house down eventually, but for about five years we had this house. The interesting thing about it was, well he started it because he saw about five boys walking through the St. James parking lot, they were drunk; he wanted to
get them involved with some positive people and get them off the street and everything. He did that with the house and about two weeks ago we just had our second annual reunion picnic of the kids from the house forty-two years later. It was at Warren Park in Hopelawn and it was just beautiful. Most of the kids made it through. They’re successful and they’re having good lives. I went to take a picture of Father McCormac and one of the boys who set this whole thing up—he paid for the whole picnic each year, he’s paying for it himself now, the food and the band and the rental of the park—and just before I snapped the picture he had his arm around Father McCormac.

Brenda Velasco: That’s quite an achievement!
Harry Bernstein: I’m tearing up a little bit but just before I snapped the picture the boy turned to Father McCormac and he said you saved my life.
Brenda Velasco: That was quite an achievement.
Harry Bernstein: It was just unbelievable. Father McCormac is down in Trenton now saving the lives of poor African American people down there getting housing for them. He has over a hundred houses that he’s redone with the help of some Woodbridge people who have done and have done some electrical work and various things. There were various attorneys and accountants from Woodbridge who helped him do this project down in Trenton. He now has a clothing store for the poor. He has a school for the young African American kids in kindergarten. He has a chapel and a big gymnasium he built. He’s just amazing. He’s actually living the life of what people were saying in the 1960s.

Brenda Velasco: And he achieved it.
Harry Bernstein: And he achieved it.
Brenda Velasco: He had a goal and he achieved it.
Harry Bernstein: And he continues to achieve it and he’s also living the life as priests are supposed to: living a life of poverty which he definitely is. In 1986, another thing I remember was that we began the Alcohol and Drug Program here in Woodbridge Township big time. I used to work in the schools and my supervisor allowed me to construct a fifty step program and we wound up educating children of alcoholics. We found adult children of alcoholics who volunteered to help us with groups all around the township which continues until this day. We affected kids in positive ways and their parents to understand the effect alcohol has on families along with the police DARE program.

Brenda Velasco: So your program was in the school?
Harry Bernstein: Yes.
Brenda Velasco: And naturally you were an employee of the school at the time.
Harry Bernstein: Right, I even started ALATEEN groups in the junior high schools, the five junior high schools, and the three senior highs with volunteers. My wife, being an adult child of an alcoholic, she volunteered at Iselin Middle and others volunteered. A school nurse volunteered and it was just fantastic. So hopefully we educated hundreds and hundreds of kids who have gone on to educate other people and their own children about, as they say, the dangers of drugs and alcohol; alcohol being the main drug abuse in our country. So in summation, I would say I’m proud to be from this historic Township of Woodbridge where the Parkway and Turnpike cross. I’m proud that my Woodbridge High School graduation class of 1964 was the
largest Woodbridge class to graduate and that those one thousand one hundred and seventy-seven kids were spread all over the country and they’re doing good things. The last thing I just want to mention was in 1971, when I was president of the J.C. Chapter; we ran like ninety projects and we conducted the first walk ever. There were no walks or runs in 1971 anywhere up North here. I heard about something down in Tennessee from the Good Ship Hope that ran a walk so I got a friend of mine, Bobs Wiegers, whom you knew Brenda.

_Brenda Velasco:_ Oh yes.

_Harry Bernstein:_ I asked Bob, he was a local printer, if he would be the Chairperson; he said he would. We wound up with hundreds of teenagers from all the schools walking twenty miles through every part of the township with the help of Mayor Barone shutting down streets and the sheriff, and I believe it was Mr. DeMarino, at that time the county roads. It started at Woodbridge Center and we went around Woodbridge Center, down Main Street, into Sewaren and Port Reading. We touched every part of the township and money was made. We took over Gadek’s swimming pool which at the time was dormant, and we opened it for a summer; we charged a dollar to get in so people who couldn’t afford to join the swim club could come and swim. But it’s just a cool thing that we, right here in Woodbridge, conducted the first walk or run ever up north. Now there’s a walk or a run every weekend somewhere and I always think back to that first “little walk for Woodbridge”.

_Brenda Velasco:_ And it was benefiting people who needed help.

_Harry Bernstein:_ Yes. So the kids from Bunns Lane maybe who couldn’t afford to join a pool could come for a dollar. Anybody who wanted to come could come. We hired our own person. In fact, we hired Jim Patten who became a council person in Woodbridge years later and he was our manager of the pool. He had some kids from Woodbridge High School that he hired. He was a teacher there and they helped him run the pool for that summer.

_Brenda Velasco:_ That’s quite an achievement!

_Harry Bernstein:_ Yes, it was pretty cool.

_Brenda Velasco:_ And you’ve got something to be proud about.

_Harry Bernstein:_ Yes, we still have our little buttons with a turtle on it saying Walk for Woodbridge. Bob did a great job chairing that.

_Brenda Velasco:_ Well, I thank you very much. You’ve laid the foundation. Well your father was in the first aid and you just continued that spirit, the Bernstein spirit there.

_Harry Bernstein:_ He motivated me a lot. To see him running in the middle of the night…….

_Brenda Velasco:_ When people are trying to flee and he is going into a building to help others.

_Harry Bernstein:_ Right.

_Brenda Velasco:_ So you perpetuated the legacy. So thank you for your contributions to Woodbridge. We’re the beneficiaries of the Bernstein family, thank you.

_Harry Bernstein:_ Oh, there are a lot of people including yourself doing a lot of good things around here and that’s why the township is to great in the summer because there are so many things to do. You can’t be bored here in the township. There is always something going on even if you come to the library here and go on the
computer. I mean, or in the schools now they have computers in all the libraries. That was unheard of when I grew up. There were no computers.

*Brenda Velasco:* No, we’re dating ourselves now.

*Harry Bernstein:* Yes.

*Brenda Velasco:* We’re going to conclude the interview and I thank you very much Harry Bernstein and for the menu from 1957 and all your memories. Thank you for sharing them.