Oral History Interview
Rich Simeone
WH065
(written transcript and digital audio)
On September 25, 2009, Rich Simeone was interviewed at the Woodbridge Main Library by Brenda Velasco at 1:00 P.M. Rich Simeone is also the nephew of Dominick Coppola (interview #47) of Port Reading.

1. Identify individual-name, section, date of birth.

*Rich Simeone:* My name is Richard Simeone. I live in Port Reading. I was born on January 12, 1943.
*Brenda Velasco:* You were born right during the war then?
*Rich Simeone:* I was.

2. How long have you lived in Woodbridge?

*Rich Simeone:* I’ve lived in Woodbridge my entire life which is sixty-six years.
*Brenda Velasco:* That’s a long time. Did you family live in Port Reading or did they move here, your parents?
*Rich Simeone:* My parent’s parents came here from Italy to work on the Reading Railroad and my mother’s parents opened up a small grocery store on the corner of Tappen Street and Third Street in Port Reading. I was born in Port Reading.
*Brenda Velasco:* So when they opened up the store, your maternal grandparents, what was your mom’s maiden name then?
*Rich Simeone:* Rose Zuccaro.
*Brenda Velasco:* Okay, so they had a store on Tappen and….
*Rich Simeone:* Third Street.
*Brenda Velasco:* Third Street.
*Rich Simeone:* Which is now the Chubenko Funeral Home.
*Brenda Velasco:* Okay, because there were a lot of mom and pop stores around at that time.
*Rich Simeone:* Yes.
*Brenda Velasco:* Do you recall what part of Italy your paternal grandparents came from?
*Rich Simeone:* The County they were from was Avellino and the town was Piestrastornina.
*Brenda Velasco:* Wow, so you were about the fifth person I’m interviewing who can trace their origins to this town in Avellino.

3. Why did you or your family move to Port Reading?

*Brenda Velasco:* We’re talking about your maternal and paternal grandparents.
*Rich Simeone:* As far as I could remember it was the town that most of the Italian families came to when they came to the United States. And like I said the work was at the Reading Railroad. I guess everyone in Port Reading, at one time or another,
worked at the Reading Railroad. Like I said it was a town where there were a lot of Italians and from that area where they came from, Avellino, Pietrastornina.

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: Since you lived in Port Reading for sixty-six years, and you mentioned your maternal grandparents’ store which is now a funeral parlor, you’ve witnessed a lot of changes here.

Rich Simeone: Yes.

Brenda Velasco: Okay, let’s look at some of the physical changes that have occurred.

Rich Simeone: Several new home developments were built. One stretches from the Port Reading border all the way to the Carteret border. The Hess Refinery moved in, Kopper’s Coke (Plastic) Plant and now a warehouse park is being built along ProLogis Way and Port Reading Avenue. In the last two years, a Hindu Temple was opened in the old Supersaver building on Port Reading Avenue.

Brenda Velasco: That was a food market at one time.

Rich Simeone: It was.

Brenda Velasco: Okay, let’s go back to some of those new homes. What was there before those new homes?

Rich Simeone: A wooded area.

Brenda Velasco: Alright, so fields?

Rich Simeone: Fields, yes. The new project started on Sunset Drive and extends all the way to Willow Street which is the Carteret/Port Reading border line.

Brenda Velasco: When did that new construction of new homes begin, do you recall?


Brenda Velasco: Okay, so after World War II. That was that whole post-World War II boom.

Rich Simeone: Yes, and after the Korean War also.

Brenda Velasco: That’s right, after the Korean War and what happened to Kopper’s Coke?

Rich Simeone: As far as I know they either went Chapter Eleven or they just moved out of town.

Brenda Velasco: Okay and that was by the waterfront am I correct?

Rich Simeone: No, that was on Port Reading Avenue. Unfortunately from what I understood back then they had ten years of methane free tax but I guess it was a PILOT program and when the ten years were up they closed.

Brenda Velasco: Do you recall the year that they moved out?

Rich Simeone: No ma’am.

Brenda Velasco: And the reason you’re saying, no ma’am, I also have to mention that you were a former policeman at one time too.

Rich Simeone: Yes, I was.

Brenda Velasco: Okay, we’re going to get into that much later.

Rich Simeone: Yes.

Brenda Velasco: Do you recall when Hess Refinery came in?

Rich Simeone: It was prior to 1958 because my brother got out of the Air Force in 1958 and was hired by the Hess Refinery so I’m going to say it was built somewhere between 1956 and 1958.
Brenda Velasco: And the Reading Railroad was still operating in this area at that time.

Rich Simeone: Yes, and it was still the Reading Railroad. It’s no longer the Reading Railroad, it’s now Conrail.

Brenda Velasco: Conrail, CSX, whatever it’s called now.

Rich Simeone: They were bought out by somebody.

Brenda Velasco: How about stores in the area?

Rich Simeone: There were a few stores. The old families that were there were Micharelli’s Confectionery Store and there was the Gettigan’s soda fountain place. That was on Port Reading Avenue right along side the Jersey Central Railroad tracks because right at the point the Jersey Central Railroad tracks and the Reading Railroad tracks crossed. The Jersey Central Railroad was more of a passenger railroad and, of course, Reading Railroad was industrial (freight) and moved coal out of Pennsylvania and brought it down here.

Brenda Velasco: Okay, now the Jersey Central did it have any stops in Port Reading?

Rich Simeone: It has one stop in Port Reading.

Brenda Velasco: For passenger’s to get on?

Rich Simeone: Yes, my father worked in Elizabeth Port for forty-two years and used that Central Railroad every day to get to work and come home. He worked for the Central Railroad of New Jersey but his place of employment was at Elizabeth Port which was a repair shop for cars and engines.

Brenda Velasco: Okay, so while he was not employed by the Reading Railroad…..

Rich Simeone: He never worked for the Reading Railroad.

Brenda Velasco: He worked for the Jersey Central…..

Rich Simeone: Jersey Central Railroad, correct.

Brenda Velasco: Alright, it was still a railroad which was the main means of transportation going back to those days.

Rich Simeone: Yes.

Brenda Velasco: Any other stories that you can think of when you were growing up.

Rich Simeone: There was Louie Martino’s store. That was on Port Reading Avenue by the firehouse. That store is no longer in business either. The gentleman and his wife both passed away and it’s now a pool supply store. And D’Orsi’s Bakery, prior to where it is now on Port Reading Avenue, was located in what we called the downtown section.

Brenda Velasco: Do you want to define the downtown section of Port Reading?

Rich Simeone: There were actually four sections. There was over the bridge, which is the Avenue section of Port Reading over the Turnpike Bridge, we called that over the bridge. Then there was Port Reading which was down by St. Anthony’s Church, Port Reading Avenue and Lee Street, E Street, all that area. Then there was, before the bridge was built on Port Reading Avenue, it you crossed over the set of railroad tracks of the Central Railroad and the Reading Railroad that was considered the Downtown section. So D’Orsi’s Bakery was located in the Downtown section on the corner of Tappen Street and Second Street.

Brenda Velasco: You’ve got a good memory. Okay, and then there was also another section?

Brenda Velasco: Hagaman Heights, okay, and that was closer to Carteret.
Rich Simeone: Yes.
Brenda Velasco: How about houses of worship?
Rich Simeone: There was only one and that was St. Anthony’s Church. It was built in 1914 and rebuilt in 1991.
Brenda Velasco: Okay, because it’s a modern facility now.
Rich Simeone: Now it is, yes.
Brenda Velasco: Why did they have to rebuild it?
Rich Simeone: The walls started to crack on the old church and it had a lot of asbestos which would have been a very expensive removal and the roof was leaking. So instead of investing a lot of money to fix up the church that was still going to have problems, it was decided to build a new church which we did do.
Brenda Velasco: And it’s a vibrant church today.
Rich Simeone: It is.
Brenda Velasco: Getting back to some of the stores, your maternal grandparents had a store, Zuccaro you said, now were there other mom and pop stores in the area?
Rich Simeone: That Micharelli’s was a mom and pop store, the one I mentioned on Port Reading Avenue.
Brenda Velasco: Okay.
Rich Simeone: Gettigan’s wasn’t so much as a mom and pop store it was really like the old soda fountain-ones with the hand, you know, you had the soda.
Brenda Velasco: Oh, yes.
Rich Simeone: You had the seltzer and all the water thing and it was a candy store like and so was Martino’s, that was a candy store.
Brenda Velasco: Where did your mom do most of her shopping then? Did you have any A&Ps?
Rich Simeone: No, the A&P was in Woodbridge on Main Street. There was Alexander’s Foodtown which was located almost on the borderline of Carteret and Port Reading. The Zahida family owned it; that’s also a temple now. I think it’s a different sect of Hindu people.
Brenda Velasco: Which reflects the demographic changes of the area, too.
Rich Simeone: Yes.
Brenda Velasco: Okay, how about schools?
Rich Simeone: We had two schools. We had School #9 which was located at the corner of West Avenue and at that time School Street, which has since been changed to Milos Way. And then we had the chicken coop up on Holly Street in the Hagaman Heights section of Port Reading. I don’t know what they called that school other than the chicken coop because that’s what it was.
Brenda Velasco: Which school did you attend?
Rich Simeone: School #9 on West Avenue.
Brenda Velasco: And the chicken coop school is no longer there.
Rich Simeone: No, that’s a neighborhood park now.
Brenda Velasco: Okay, so it was replaced by a park.

5. What public buildings/property were there?- post office, library, parks, firehouse, schools, etc.
Brenda Velasco: We mentioned the chicken coop school was demolished and is now a park, School #9?

Rich Simeone: They built a new School #9 on Turner Street and the old School #9 was sold to St. Anthony’s Church who used it as an elementary school for probably ten years until the enrollment became so low that it wasn’t feasible to keep the school opened anymore and the diocese closed it down.

Brenda Velasco: So you attended the old School #9.

Rich Simeone: Yes, I attended the old School #9 up until seventh grade.

Brenda Velasco: And then after seventh grade?

Rich Simeone: Eighth grade I went to the new Woodbridge High School. We are the only class that went to Woodbridge High School for five years. I did eighth, ninth, tenth, eleventh and twelfth grades at the new high school.

Brenda Velasco: What’s your graduating class then?


Brenda Velasco: So you attended five years of high school.

Rich Simeone: Five years, eight, nine, ten, eleven and twelve in the same school.

Brenda Velasco: That is unique.

Rich Simeone: The only class ever to do it. We didn’t have middle schools in those days. It was elementary school and then….

Brenda Velasco: Were you the first graduating class?

Rich Simeone: No.

Brenda Velasco: But the only class that attended five years. Were you on split sessions back then?

Rich Simeone: Eighth grade was all day, freshman and sophomore were afternoons, and junior and senior was in the morning.

Brenda Velasco: But as an eighth grader you went all day. You were stuck there as you watched the kids come and go. How about the post office?

Rich Simeone: We always had a post office although it was located in several different buildings until the permanent one was built on the corner of Port Reading Avenue and East Tappen Street.

Brenda Velasco: Do you recall was it in stores or…..?

Rich Simeone: No, there was a post office located at the corner of Port Reading Avenue and Turner Street and from what I gathered they rented the building from the owner. The very first post office, from what I recall, was located at 383 Woodbridge Avenue in Port Reading. That’s the building I was actually born in.

Brenda Velasco: That’s why you know the address.

Rich Simeone: Yes. I was born in that building and I was delivered by a midwife. Her name was Mrs. Lombardi. She was the midwife in Port Reading.

Brenda Velasco: And she lived in Port Reading, too, then?

Rich Simeone: She did. Where I don’t know but I’m sure she delivered quite a few of us.

Brenda Velasco: I’m sure.

Rich Simeone: Hospital weren’t like it is today.

Brenda Velasco: You also didn’t have medical insurance back then either.

Rich Simeone: No, absolutely not.
Brenda Velasco: So it was a whole different ballgame for your parents. Did Port Reading ever have its own library?

Rich Simeone: Not maintained or built by the township. It was built by St. Anthony’s Church and was maintained by St. Anthony’s Church. It was on West Avenue on property which is now owned by Hess Oil.

Brenda Velasco: So St. Anthony’s played a big role.

Rich Simeone: They built and maintained the library.

Brenda Velasco: How about parks?

Rich Simeone: We had two parks. One park was on Fourth Street and the other was on Holly Street where the chicken coop was.

Brenda Velasco: And they were township parks?

Rich Simeone: They were township parks.

Brenda Velasco: Then we get to the firehouse.

Rich Simeone: The original firehouse I believe was built in the 1920s. A new firehouse was built and dedicated in May of 1967. The firehouse was always on the corner of Port Reading Avenue and West Avenue.

Brenda Velasco: Okay, so it was the same location.

Rich Simeone: Same location. Just that they tore the old one down and put the new one up.

Brenda Velasco: And that has also played a prominent role in Port Reading if you’ve always had your own volunteer firehouse.


Brenda Velasco: Can you think of anything else you want to mention for Question #5? Have we covered everything in that area?

Rich Simeone: Yes, ma’am.

Brenda Velasco: Okay then we can go to Question #6.

6. What did you do for recreation?

Brenda Velasco: What did you do for recreation growing up because it was during the war in 1943 that you were born.

Rich Simeone: We played a lot of hardball on the P&R Field. Now the P&R Field on Cliff Road is now part of the Hess Refinery. We also played basketball and handball on a course that was built by St. Anthony’s Church on West Avenue next to the library. In the summer we rode our bicycles around town and we swam in the outdoor swimming pool at the Fourth Street Playground.

Brenda Velasco: Okay, is that Bowtie?

Rich Simeone: No it was a pool probably 50 X 100 and it was probably no more than three feet deep. When it was hot we just cooled off. Each year the Reading Railroad would have a train trip to Willow Brook Park in Pennsylvania. I think the cost for each person was like, I think, a dollar. We had a steam engine train take us from the Port Reading coal yards to Willow Brook, Pennsylvania and bring us back. They would give us lunch and something to drink all the time. They did that for probably ten years before, for whatever reason, maybe when they were sold or taken over by either Conrail or CSX, the train ride stopped. And of course, the steam engines no longer exist. Everything is now diesel.

Brenda Velasco: Now was this just for children or for adults?
Rich Simeone: No families. It was a family trip.  
Brenda Velasco: And a dollar per person?  
Rich Simeone: I believe that’s what the cost was, yes.  
Brenda Velasco: You got a lot for that.  
Rich Simeone: You got a lot for the dollar.  
Brenda Velasco: And what happened during the winter? You had the parks and you had swimming.  
Rich Simeone: In the winter I guess we just had our snowball fights and shoveled snow.  
Brenda Velasco: But St. Anthony’s, once again, played a role with recreation by providing the handball…..  
Rich Simeone: The handball courts and basketball courts were built and owned by St. Anthony’s Church.

7. What was the focal point of your community at that time?  
Rich Simeone: The church was the focal point of our community.  
Brenda Velasco: Well, you mentioned in sports and you mentioned the library, anything else?  
Rich Simeone: Each year they would run a carnival and then they would also have a parade for St. Anthony’s from the church on Port Reading Avenue and it would go on Port Reading Avenue into the Downtown section again, turn around and come back up to the church and then, of course, we would have mass at the church. Sometimes we would have some light refreshments. Of course, at that time, the families and the church were very close.  
Brenda Velasco: Is there a priest that you remember?  
Rich Simeone: Father Stanislaus Milos.  
Brenda Velasco: And he wasn’t Italian.  
Rich Simeone: No, he was Polish. He has the longest time at St. Anthony’s Church and he also started a band. He had a marching band under his direction and also all the recreation that was built was under his direction. He was here for probably thirty years.  
Brenda Velasco: Wow!  
Rich Simeone: In an all Italian town.  
Brenda Velasco: And very well liked.  
Rich Simeone: Very well liked; absolutely controlled with an iron hand.  
Brenda Velasco: He was quite a priest.  
Rich Simeone: He was.  
Brenda Velasco: He was a good role model because he started the library, the recreation, the parades, the carnival and he gave a center where people could meet.  
Rich Simeone: They eventually built, that’s right, St. Anthony’s rec hall on West Avenue also.  
Brenda Velasco: Okay, is there anything you can remember about the school at all?  
Rich Simeone: It was old.  
Brenda Velasco: And then it was knocked down.  
Rich Simeone: And then it was knocked down after that. Well that’s when, in order to build our church, Hess Oil purchased School #9, all the property that the church
owned on West Avenue which included those handball courts, tennis courts and the library and they also purchased a soda distribution center which was not owned by the church but by a private person and an eight apartment building next to where the library was. So Hess owns now from Milos Way down to Father Milos Park on West Avenue and the rec center too they bought. With the money we received from Hess Oil we were able to put up a church. It’s not paid off but it has gone a long way.  

_Brenda Velasco_: Okay, the new church that you talked about.  
_Rich Simeone_: Yes, the new church. That was built in 1991.  
_Brenda Velasco_: The railroad was also a part of Port Reading, did any of your family members, we know your father worked for the Central down in E Port, but did any other members of your extended family work for the railroad?  
_Rich Simeone_: Yes. I probably had three uncles, my brother works for Hess Refinery, so that was about it I believe. I had three relatives on both sides of the family.  
_Brenda Velasco_: Maternal and paternal then.  
_Rich Simeone_: Yes. Like I said that was really the only place where you could work in those days. The railroad just hired everybody.  
_Brenda Velasco_: Then eventually it was Hess who hired some as well.  
_Rich Simeone_: Hess hired quite a few. They were good enough to hire Port Reading residents first.  
_Brenda Velasco_: Okay, priority to Port Reading.  

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8. **Did you experience any significant happenings in Port Reading or Woodbridge-constuction, accidents, sports events, riots, discrimination etc.**  

_Brenda Velasco_: Because you’re not only a Port Reading resident, you also were a policeman.  
_Rich Simeone_: I was a police officer from 1968 to 1995. On Thanksgiving Day 1969, there was a prison riot at the Rahway Prison which is now called East Jersey State Prison on Rahway Avenue in Avenel. Even though it was called the Rahway Prison, that prison is located wholly in Avenel. Now I was assigned to patrol the area around the prison for two days until the State Police came in and put the riot down.  
_Brenda Velasco_: That was quite an experience.  
_Rich Simeone_: Yes, that was my toughest experience as a police officer all those years.  
_Brenda Velasco_: Were they able to quell the riot?  
_Rich Simeone_: As soon as the State Police moved in, it was over in a matter of hours.  
_Brenda Velasco_: Okay.  
_Rich Simeone_: We did not go into the prison. We were covering the outside of it, the highway (Route 1), Rahway Avenue and the road behind it.  
_Brenda Velasco_: Okay, and when we talk about the highway that is Route #1.  
_Rich Simeone_: Yes.  
_Brenda Velasco_: Anything else, sport events, riots, or construction?  
_Rich Simeone_: No.  

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9. **What do you like about Port Reading today?**  

_Brenda Velasco_: So you’re still in Port Reading today.
Rich Simeone: I am.
Brenda Velasco: So you must like it.
Rich Simeone: I do.
Brenda Velasco: Okay, so what do you like about Port Reading today? Plus, your wife is not from Port Reading.
Rich Simeone: My wife is originally from Jersey City. Then she moved to Carteret and then I brought her to the pinnacle of her life, I brought her into Port Reading.
Brenda Velasco: I don’t know if Adrienne would agree with you as a pinnacle of her life but she’s adapted quite well.
Rich Simeone: She has. What was good about Port Reading and still is today, more so then than now is that we are very close midtown where everyone knew each other and were not afraid to leave our doors and windows open at night because everyone trusted each other. It’s not like today, unfortunately.
Brenda Velasco: That’s true throughout (the Township) or wherever you live.
Rich Simeone: Throughout wherever you live. It’s not just Port Reading.
Brenda Velasco: No, and that unfortunate. You’re still affiliated with St. Anthony’s.
Rich Simeone: I am.
Brenda Velasco: You’re active there.
Rich Simeone: I am.

10. Do you have any family members still living in Woodbridge?
Rich Simeone: I only have one sister left and she and her family live in Edison. But I do have many cousins who still live in Port Reading.
Brenda Velasco: So you still have a bit of your extending family there; and when you’re dealing with Italians, extended family is just as important.
Rich Simeone: Quite large.
Brenda Velasco: Yes.
Rich Simeone: Just as important as your blood family.
Brenda Velasco: Right, as the nuclear family.
Rich Simeone: Right.
Brenda Velasco: And you’re still involved in Woodbridge Township because you work for……
Rich Simeone: I work for the Woodbridge Parking Utility now.
Brenda Velasco: Okay, the Woodbridge Parking Utility which is another level of enforcement. You check on all our cars to make sure we’re getting paid.
Rich Simeone: Yes.
Brenda Velasco: Anything else that we have not covered?

11. Are there any other stories or events that you would like to discuss?
Rich Simeone: I know what I wanted to tell you, in the late 1960s, Port Reading and Sewaren wanted to secede from Woodbridge Township under the 1895 Village Act of New Jersey to form the village of Port Warren. The Woodbridge Township political officers got the legislature to appeal the act. The financial burden on the remaining towns and the township would have been unbearable since most of the industrial taxpayers were located near Port Reading or Sewaren. We had the Hess Refinery,
Shell Oil, PSE&G, even though they don’t pay taxes they pay that gross receipt tax to the municipality and the Reading Railroad too I’m sure don’t pay taxes but they pay something to the township in the way of being there. The residents of Port Warren probably would have lived property tax free.

Brenda Velasco: That was a good endorsement to secede but we know it never went anyplace.

Rich Simeone: No, it didn’t. The town was successful in getting the State Legislature to repeal the act and just pulled the rug out from under us.

Brenda Velasco: And this was also mentioned in someone else’s interview too, a resident of Sewaren, this whole concept of secession (Catherine Burns, #65). Alright, so you were going to merge with Sewaren.

Rich Simeone: Yes.

Brenda Velasco: Secede from Woodbridge Township.

Rich Simeone: The only thing I think we would have had to do was probably purchase the two schools from the township. The fire district we pay our own taxes for that anyway, we still do today.

Brenda Velasco: Right.

Rich Simeone: Yes.

Brenda Velasco: And we had probably at that time, the early ‘60s, we probably had eight or ten police officers that were working for the Woodbridge Police Department. So we would have been able to start our own police department. The taxes paid by Hess and Shell alone and the gross receipt tax from PSE&G certainly would have carried us to have a nice tax free life there.

Brenda Velasco: Well, I’m glad you didn’t secede.

Rich Simeone: I’m sure a lot of other people are too.

Brenda Velasco: Yes. We are our industrial place because heavy industry was moving out of Keasbey by that time I believe so it was good.

Rich Simeone: We had it all.

Brenda Velasco: You had it all.

Rich Simeone: We had all that there and Markley Street had all warehouses on it.

Brenda Velasco: Okay, anything else that you wanted to mention?

Rich Simeone: No.

Brenda Velasco: Because that’s a fascinating story. Okay, if there’s nothing more to mention I just want to thank Rich Simeone for the interview and I learned a couple of new things here.

Rich Simeone: Good.

Brenda Velasco: And it will go on record in the Woodbridge Main Library as well as our future Historical Museum. So thank you very, very much.

Rich Simeone: I’m glad I could help.