

THE HOBOKEN HISTORICAL MUSEUM
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEWEE: TOM KENNEDY

INTERVIEWER: MYRNA KASSER

DATE: 24 JULY 2006

TAPE 2, SIDE 1

[initial portion of tape inaudible]

TK: I grabbed his hand, and a rookie policeman pulled out his gun. I yelled, "Don't shoot him. The bullet will ricochet. Try to hit him with the stick." In the meantime, I'm struggling with him and he's cursing me. He was a pretty strong guy. I pulled his hand, to try to get his hand over his head, and the muzzle of the gun was in my face, and he pulled the trigger again, and it misfired. Then what I did -- I don't know why I did it, but I put my hand right over the muzzle of the gun (if the gun went off, it was going to hit me in the hand), I bent his finger and then he screamed. His finger was almost hanging off. I'd bent his finger almost all the way back, when he screamed. I pulled the gun off him, we cuffed him, took him to headquarters, and booked him; then they took him to the hospital and he was treated. The sad part

of this story is that he was let out on low bail -- because when the paperwork went up to the judge, he didn't read it properly. He was let out on low bail, and he took off and never went to court.

The two points to that story are that Ernie Mack -- who was a friend of mine, born and raised in downtown Hoboken. We went all through St. Joseph's School together, he was a detective -- he took the gun down to the state police headquarters in Trenton, to see if it was used in another crime -- ballistics. When he came back he said to me, "Tom, you're the luckiest guy on the face of the earth." I said, "I know I am." He says, "Wait 'til you hear. They loaded the gun two times and shot it, and every time they pulled the trigger, the gun went off. It didn't misfire once." And it happened, believe it or not, on Friday the 13th. Jack Eckhart, who was a reporter in those days -- he did the local police work and local work -- he wrote a story about how lucky I was on Friday the 13th.

But the guy never went to trial, never went to jail.

MK: He just disappeared.

TK: He did. He took off. But the other part of it was -- I think you may get a kick out of this, in an indirect way, a kick -- When I went before the grand jury, I testified to exactly what took place that night. One of the people on the grand jury said to me, "Officer Kennedy, was it absolutely necessary for you to bend that man's finger back; that you rip the skin on his finger?" And the prosecutor said, "Officer, you don't have to answer that question." The people on the grand jury looked at the person, like, "Are you kidding me?" And I said, "No, no, Mr. Prosecutor, I want to answer that question. No, it wasn't necessary. I could have given him an opportunity to take the third shot, and possibly shoot and kill me." But the person actually asked me, "Was it necessary?"

But, again, on 14th Street, for some reason, a lot of things happened to me. In fact, my first arrest for "breaking and entering" was on 14th Street, between Washington -- a "breaking and entering" in a bar and restaurant between Washington and Hudson Street. Now this incident on Park Avenue, where I was almost shot, was on 14th and Park Avenue, where the armed robbery took place, and where I was almost shot was on 14th and Willow. Now 14th and Garden Street, which is only a block away -- this incident took me, where I almost lost my life -- now we had an incident where a man was

threatening his wife -- 153 14th Street, right next to "Penders [a hotel and bar]," where all those people died [in a fire many years ago].

We had the man -- Detective "Lombardi" -- I don't think he was a detective then, but we had a man who attacked his wife, beat her up and threatened her. We took him before a judge, and a judge claimed that even though he threatened his wife, threatened her with a gun, "You didn't see him with the gun." We said, "But your honor, the gun fell from the roof, right down into the courtyard." "Well, how do you know it was his gun?" We answered all kinds of questions, and he was let out on bail. Now this story is one of the worst, probably, that I can remember. There were a lot more, I guess, but this story of justice gone awry was crazy.

A week later I get a call -- 153 14th Street. (This is a terrible, terrible, tragic event, right?) I'm riding, that morning, with a rookie (and he left the job not long after this). We go up -- the guy went back with a shotgun. He killed his mother-in-law, his father-in-law, his wife, shot at his sister-in-law -- who was holding a baby (her arm was hanging off). Their brains, part of their faces, were over the wall and the television set. In the back room, Vinnie Lombardi (right, he was a detective then), he was in the back room. We were doing diagrams, we were lining things up, and he

said to me, "Tom, move to your right or your left," and I said, "Vinnie, there's another body under the bed." The blood was oozing from under the bed. He said, "No, no. Move to your right or to your left." I said, "Vinnie, there's another body under there." He said, "Move, right now!" So I took a step to my right, he said, "Look up." I looked up, and there were brains on the ceiling.

Now people may not want to hear this, but this is a true story. What happened was, after he killed all these people he sat on the bed, put the shotgun in his mouth, blew his brains out, and fell back. All the blood that was coming from under the bed -- where I thought there was another body -- was him. But that was another time. And people say, "What did you do?" There was no psychologist to speak to. You never dreamed or even thought of asking for help, because you were afraid they were going to take your gun away from you. If you said you were being affected by this -- "So, what did you do when you got off duty?" Someone said, "What did you do?" You went to the bar with a few of the guys who experienced this, and sometimes you even joked about it, to make it go away. You kind of made it like, "Did you see this? Did you see that?" Not joking the incident, but trying to take the pressure off yourself. You were trying to pretend it didn't bother you that much.

But it was a terrible, terrible tragedy -- again, justice not served. The man should have been arrested. See today, in this day and age, if you strike your wife -- years ago, when we went to a family dispute, a woman could be there with blood coming out of her nose, a fat lip or a swollen face, and if she said she didn't want to sign a complaint, you would try to get the guy out of the house. You'd say, "Come on, we'll get you a room for the night," -- \$5.00 a night down at the Hotel Victor or something. You would try to get him out of the house. He may go back and do it again. The woman, sometimes, would refuse to sign a complaint. No more. When a policeman goes there, and he sees any signs of domestic violence which is tremendous, he takes that man out and arrests him. The policeman makes the decision, not the woman.

But this poor woman would have been alive if the judge had done the right thing. Again, it was justice not served. But again, it was a terrible -- the woman who got hit with the shotgun, running out the door -- part of her arm was hanging off, but thank God, she had the baby in the other arm and the baby survived. But like I say, there were terrible tragedies.

MK: Do you think Hoboken was more violent then?

TK: Oh, absolutely. No two ways about it.

MK: What do you think the difference is? What made it so -- ?

TK: Let's put it this way. You had about 70-80,000 people, all the homes with five stories, ten families. You had that many more criminal element. You had a lot of poor families, criminals, young kids who didn't have a father image, doing whatever they wanted to do -- staying out until 2:00-3:00 in the morning because they had nobody to answer to. When I was a kid (I sound like an old-timer now), if my mother told me to be home at 9:00, I got home at 9:00. Then I'd say, "Mom, can I stay out for an extra ten or fifteen minutes?" That's what we did. This day in age, you'll catch kids out at 3:00 or 4:00 in the morning, and their mother won't even know they're out. Or, if you bring them home the mother says, "Well, what am I going to do with them? I can't do anything with them." It's a different day and age. But when I was on the job, there were a lot more people and there was a lot more crime. You had a lot of breaking and entering ~~"break-and-entries."~~ You had what we called cat burglars. They would wait, at night, to see if the lights went out and somebody

left their apartment. They would break in at night. Their name was cat burglars. Today, with all the young professionals we have living in Hoboken, almost every breaking and entering we have today is done during the day. It's done during the day.

See, we had some shrewdies years ago. The old-time street cops, we kind of looked out for things. I'll give you an example. You get a guy, he'd walk down the street and he'd have a piece of metal in a glove, and he'd have the glove in his pocket. He'd walk down the street, he'd break the window of the car, and keep walking. He'd get to the corner -- and he may have a hat on that, if you turned it inside out, was a different color. He could have a jacket that, if he turned the jacket inside out, it was a different color. If he had a scarf on, he'd take the scarf off.

Say somebody broke into a car. You look. Okay. Now what if no one saw him do that. He'd walk a block, a block and a half, and hang out. Then he'd come back and steal -- stealing radios out of cars was a big thing in those days. So he'd sit in the car. He wouldn't hide. He'd sit up like -- even if a police car went by. The police car can't see the window broken on the sidewalk side -- and there's a guy sitting in his car. He's warming up his car, or he's getting ready to go to work, or he's getting ready to go somewhere. A policeman could ride right by. In the meantime, he's got the

screwdriver out, and he's taking the radio. People go, "How can that happen during the day?" It was done.

So what they do also -- and what they used to do years ago, and to this day -- they ring a bell, and when somebody says, "Hello," they go, "I'm with UPS. I have a delivery on the first floor. I just want to leave it outside their door." Right? Now the burglar gets in. He's buzzed in. He listens upstairs, nobody opens a door, so he knocks on the door. If somebody opens the door, he goes, "Ooops. I'm sorry. I got the wrong apartment." The person doesn't know. They just think it's an innocent mistake. If nobody answers, he goes to work and breaks in. There are all kinds of gimmicks these people have. They're shrewd. They're smart. The sad part is, a lot of them are on drugs, and they'll take something and sell it for a quick fix. They're not looking to take all kinds -- they'll take as much as they can and get out, so they can get a quick fix somewhere. But that's why breaking and entering is more common today. (They call them B&Es.)

MK: When you were on the force, was there a big drug problem in Hoboken?

TK: No.

MK: A crack problem?

TK: No. When I first went on the job, believe it or not, the biggest problem -- if you want to call it a drug problem, believe it or not -- was sniffing glue.

MK: I didn't realize that was an old-time problem.

TK: Oh, yes. Sniffing glue was very -- they got the airplane glue, put it in a brown bag, they'd pour the glue in, and sniff it. Then there was an incident where they used to sniff hairspray. It didn't happen here in Hoboken, but in Bergen County -- when the word got out, nobody did that anymore. A kid was sniffing hairspray, and he sniffed so much of it that it coated his lungs and he died. When they performed the autopsy, the hairspray -- to keep a woman's hair -- stayed in his lungs, and all of a sudden the hairspray gig was over.

Then there was the usual popping pills, and then smoking pot. But the other drugs, when I was a young cop, you didn't see any of that. You didn't see that. Later on, that started to come in. And then later on in the '60s, you had the psychedelic drugs and all the other things, but when I

was first on the job popping pills, sniffing glue and things like that were very, very common. Then what you did was you took the kid home to his parents, explained to them what was going on, and the parents would take care of it, a lot of them, right then and there. The guy would get punished, or the girl would get punished or something -- and you didn't want to see them get a record for taking that -- so you did the best you could, trying to help kids out.

MK: Were there gangs in Hoboken?

TK: No. Gangs hung out on the corner. You know. There's a gang on the corner. But no, not gangs like you have today. They had none of that in those days. No, they had none of that. I was called -- hanging out downtown Hoboken. We were pretty rough and tough kids, because we were all poor, we hung out on the corner, and we were called the St. Joe's Gang and the St. Joe's Mob, not the "kids from St. Joe's parish." Because we were kind of rough and tough guys. Nobody would dream of coming down there and giving us a hard time. They wouldn't dream of it. They wouldn't come down to our area and give us a hard time. They would never insult one of the girls who hung out in downtown Hoboken -- never -- because we would take care of business -- not in a bad way. We called them

fist-fights. There are no fist-fights anymore. They have guns and knives and automatic weapons now. If we had a disagreement with somebody, we would go down to a place called Ryan's Lots. It was in back of Cut-Rite Field. Or we'd go to Cut-Rite Field, which was right next door, by the Jersey City border, and we'd form a circle. His friends and our friends would form a circle. Two guys, bare knuckles, would get into the circle and have a fist-fight. At the first draw of blood, the fight was over. If the guy went down -- he got punched and he went down -- the fight was over. You didn't jump on him, and punch him. The fight was over. It wasn't written rules. They were just street rules; that's the way it was. Fist-fights, we called them, they called them. You'd get your knuckles up, you'd look at the guy and flinch, and try to get a good punch on him. They called them fist-fights. They were very, very common in those days. Very common. But guns, baseball bats, knives -- no such thing. They were fist-fights.

How we doin'? Pretty good?

MK: You know what? We're almost done with this tape. Two tapes.

TK: Is that enough for you?

MK: So whatever you want to end up with here.
Any last, final words.

TK: Well -- final words. I think I was one of the luckiest guys to grow up in a poor family -- a poor, religious family. When I left the house my mother would always say, in her Irish brogue, "Make sure you say please and thank you. Don't use bad language." I remember every one of us going to bed at night had to kneel next to our bed and pray. I remember my father, before he went to work, kneeling by the bed, saying his prayers. And I remember every time he came home from the firehouse -- I remember him kneeling down, praying, and thanking God that he got through his tour of duty safe. I was brought up in a very, very religious family -- not to the extent where we were all Holy Roller types, but we respected people. I was taught to earn everything that I got, to work hard for. As I said earlier, I delivered milk for twenty cents an hour; I shined shoes; I delivered the fruits and vegetables for Sam Pincus; I delivered the *News* and *Mirror*; and I remember, growing up, with all my friends, we were just all common, downtown Hoboken poor people who got along with everybody.

I remember, as I said earlier, I remember the war, and I remember all the heroes who fought to make us free

today. I'm grateful that I had the opportunity to play sports. My whole life, when I was a young kid, when I wasn't working, it was always sports, sports, sports. It kept me out of a lot of trouble because, in reality, a lot of my friends did get in very, very serious trouble. One story -- can I go on with this?

MK: Yes.

TK: I was in a radio car one night -- the midnight to 8:00 shift -- and in the wee hours of the morning I get a call right off 4th and Bloomfield, a fight in the street. In those days, fights in the street were common. I put the light on, and I start to hustle down there, touching my brakes at the intersection. Another call with a backup unit -- #107, #105, double it up, it's supposed to be a bad fight. Now we're going -- then one other car responds, and there's shots fired. I drove down Garden Street, made a left on Third, then a left on Bloomfield Street. I jumped out of the car, and there was a guy laying on the sidewalk. I ran over to him, I turned him over and he grabbed my hand. He said, "Tommy, please help me. I'm all burned up. I just got shot in the back." It was a guy I hung out with all my life. I went to his wedding, he went to my wedding. I put him in the

ambulance, I rushed him to the hospital, I got a priest to give him last rites. The FBI had me with him all day, and they told me there was nothing they could do to save him. He had one bullet in his buttocks, one in his back, and one in his upper back that was in his heart. And he refused to tell me who did it. I had tears in my eyes. I said to him, "Please --" His name was Walter "Glockner." We all knew him as "Hans." He was a big, strapping guy with blonde hair. He said, "No, Tommy. Whatever happened to me will be taken care of."

He went into a coma, the FBI drove me home, and a few hours later I got a phone call. My wife said, "It's police headquarters." They said, "Tom, the FBI wants to pick you up in front of your house. He just died."

MK: How did the FBI get involved?

TK: Because the night before that he hit a man at a union meeting. The union was Local #560. Did you ever hear of Local #560? It was run by Tony Provenzano, known as Tony Pro. Rumors had it that some of that group were the ones who hit Hoffa, years later. But he hit Tony Pro's brother-in-law, a big, big guy -- one punch, the night before, and knocked him down. The rumors were that some members from Local #560 came. The story from the witnesses was that he was

getting the better of three guys. They jumped him, and he was beating them up. (He was beating *them* up; that's how tough he was.) He was shot in the back three times.

But another tragic -- like I say, with all the good things, growing up downtown Hoboken, there are other stories I could tell you, another time, about friends where the same thing happened. They disappeared, their bodies were never found, and they went in a different direction than I did. My father told me when I went on a job, he said, "Thomas, let me tell you something. You're going to wear the uniform of the Hoboken Police Department, and you're going to get tempted to break the law. You're going to get tempted by a lot of things to make money. Please remember this. If you do, and you do something wrong and you get caught, not only are you going to disgrace that patch on your arm, you're going to disgrace the Kennedy name. Always remember that." And I always did. That took me through my whole career on the police department. I'm very grateful for the way I was brought up. They were tough days. We didn't have the material things in life, but the values we were brought up with took me through life.

And I'm very grateful I went into the Marine Corps, because that helped a bit, too. That helped keep me out of trouble, too. I thought I was a tough kid from downtown Hoboken. They taught me a lesson. Then, like I say, all the

rest of my life -- I'm just grateful I survived all the things I did in the police department. I have a lot of sad memories of the police department, tragic things that happened. I still bear scars on my arm from being trapped in fires, and saving - - on many, many occasions I was trapped in a fire, saving people. I'm not bragging. You asked me to tell the story, and I'm just telling the story. I was rendered unconscious at fires, where the fire department came in and pulled me out -- 222 Willow Avenue was one of them. I received stitches on several occasions.

Again, I'm just grateful that I survived. I'm going to be seventy-three in September. I went through five bypasses, and I'm here to tell the story about it -- heaven, hell or Hoboken! And God bless America.